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By C. L. Antrobus

By C. L. ANTROBUS

QUALITY CORNER. 12° . . . $1.50

WILDERSMOOR. 12° . . . $1.50

New York—G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS—London

WILDERSMOOR

A NOVEL

BY

C. L. ANTROBUS
AUTHOR OF "QUALITY CORNER," ETC.

"Let both grow together until the harvest."—MATT. xiii. 30

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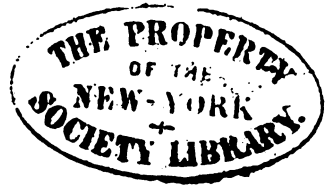

TO MY COUSIN

ALICE HANSLIP

WHO THOUGH A RELATION

IS YET A FRIEND

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED

WITH THE DEEPEST GRATITUDE

AND AFFECTION.

WILDERSMOOR

WILDERSMOOR

silence of that lonely moorland. On this cold grey December afternoon, the mists that lurked in the moorland pools floated upwards as twilight fell, spreading their wan folds far and wide over the landscape like a ghostly mantle. The Pike loomed dimly, a vast formless shadow, through the fog that rolled up so softly, so silently. Even the ruddy firelight that streamed cheerily from the windows of Wildersmoor Hall lost itself in the white vapour before it reached the pines by the gates.

Wildersmoor was crossed and recrossed by many paths that wound past rush-fringed pools and treacherous patches of marshy ground: paths easy to traverse by daylight, easy, too, at night, to those accustomed to the moor, those to whose eyes each heap of withered fern, each clump of gorse or bramble or stunted willow, was a familiar landmark. But to the stranger, Wildersmoor without light of day or stars was a death-trap; and in a dense fog such as was now veiling everything it was dangerous even to those dwelling on it from childhood.

Save to one. There was one man in the district who, by reason of his affliction, could wander about the moor as easily in the blackest night as in brilliant sunshine. An elderly man, strong and hearty, known as "Blind John o' Wildersmoor." His surname had been so long unused that it was well-nigh forgotten He earned his living by carrying parcels to and from the station. A cheap and trustworthy messenger was a convenience appreciated in that part of the world, where farms were wide apart and housewives busy. Very often the modest sixpence which he demanded, no matter how short or how far the distance, would

be supplemented by a gift of food or clothing. He lived in one of a row of cottages near the Hall, and old Granny Darlow, his next door neighbour, cooked his meals and "redded up" for him in consideration of a small sum paid every Saturday night.

Despite his infirmity, Blind John knew by the voice —nay, by the footstep—every man, woman, and child for miles round; never failing to address them by name when accosted. He knew, too, all the gossip of the neighbourhood and retailed it with zest, sitting over his pipe and beer in the little sanded parlour known as "th' Snug," behind the bar of the Grey Wolf, the only inn in the district.

To his regular customers he was as good as—in fact, better than a newspaper. For what did the dwellers of Wildersmoor care about the doings of the great world? Their world was bounded by Woffendale on the one hand and the grey restless sea on the other. All else was "foreign parts." Blind John told them exactly what they wished to know—viz., their neighbours' affairs. Nothing else mattered. So the tap-tap of his guiding stick was far more interesting on Wildersmoor than the postman's knock.

This dark December evening that same stick went tap-tapping on the frozen ground along a fairly wide path that led across the moor to the north-west. The fog was so thick that it felt like a damp blanket to the face, and to distinguish surrounding objects was impossible. But Blind John went on at his usual slow steady pace; to him darkness and light were alike. He carried a large parcel, and was on his way to a distant farm where he was tolerably sure of a good supper; and he further reflected that on his return home

he could spend the remainder of the evening at the Grey Wolf, thus satisfactorily concluding the day.

He had gone, perhaps, a quarter of the distance he had to traverse, the heavy tramp of his iron-bound clogs and the light tapping of his stick sounding hollow on the hard ground, when he heard other footsteps behind him. He stopped and listened. His keen ears told him the approaching stranger wore boots—not clogs, and the step was unfamiliar.

"A mon—an' quick on th' feet—an' wi' boots," he muttered. "I conna tell whoever it mun be."

And turning his head he challenged his unseen companion:

"Who's that theer?"

"What's that to you?" came sharply from the fog.

"Eh, mon!—tha needna freshen up so! Tha mun ha' getten too mooch beer i' thee. Most folk 'ud be glad enow to happen o' Blind John i' a fog on Wildersmoor."

"Are you blind?" the voice was friendly now; a singularly melodious voice, sweet and ringing. "Can you guide me to North Rode station? I have lost my way in this infernal fog."

"I reckon thou hast," with a chuckle of satisfaction. "Most folk 'ud be lost but me. Ay, I con guide thee well enow. North Rode, did tha say? Then tha wants to go to Riverton, belike?"

"Now what does that matter?" The tone was half-amused, half-impatient.

"Eh, dear!—up again! Mester, tha'll ha' to be a rare hond at punsin' if tha means to go through th' world talking to folk like that. Sithee, I allus charge a shilling fur guiding folk in a fog."

"I will give you five. Push on!"

"Nay,—nay. If I pushed on, as tha calls it, I'd push th' two on us into th' nighest pond, I'm thinking. I mun go my own pace mester."

"Will not five shillings hurry you up?" with a laugh.

"Nay, nor fifty. What 'ud be th' good o' th' brass if I wur sticking head down i' one o' them bog-holes? Mester, tha's getten no more head-filling nor a babe."

"All right."

The stranger did not seem inclined to enter into conversation, but Blind John had never held his peace in his life, and was not likely to do so on the present occasion. He wanted to know who he was guiding, and therefore began talking in a manner calculated to lead round to the subject of his companion's identity.

"Wildersmoor's a foine place fur fogs," he observed, complacently. "There's nowt like 'em i' a' Lancashire. I've heard as theer's rare uns i' Lunnon, an' th' Queen dunnot like 'em. Eh! if hoo'd coom down here I'll warrant hoo'd see summat i' fogs as 'ud make Lunnon nowt. Dost tha know Wildersmoor, mester?"

"No."

"I thowt tha didna, or tha'd ha' bethowt thee afore tha'd ha' set foot on it to-neet. Happen tha'rt fro' Woffendale?"

"No."

"I know a many o' th' Woffendale folk. Theer's owd Elkanah Fleming o' th' Atlas Works. I mind him these forty year an' more. Ay, an' his son, too, Mr. Ralph. An' theer's Mr. Quentin, brother's son to owd Elkanah. Eh, everybody likes Mr. Quentin. He lives o'er at th' Hall; his folk allus lived theer.

'How art tha, John?' he says, wi' a slap betwixt th' shoulders as 'ud almost jolt the Pike! He's a foine young chap, is Mr. Quentin. Happen tha knows him, mester, if tha belongs to these parts?"

"I don't belong to these parts," absently.

"Riverton is nowt much o' a town, I've heard," pursued John, taking up a fresh scent. "It's noan place fur a mon to start in if he wants to make brass. But belike tha hasna been theer long?"

No answer to this.

"An' theer isna many trains as stop at North Rode fur Riverton. Tha sees, folk dunnot want to go theer. I know'd a chap as coom fro' Scotland an' lived at Riverton fur a spell. But he told me he couldna stond it, it wur that dull. So he made a flitting to Woffendale. He wur allus talking o' Scotland, saying it wur summat grand."

"It may be. I do not know."

John tried another trail.

"Eh, but this fog's a thick un! I wonder what them Lunnon fogs is like. Did tha ever see one, mester?"

"Two or three."

"Did tha?" in the tone of one who has at last arrived at something definite. "I reckon they wurna like this?"

"No."

"I thowt not. But I make no doubt as Lunnon's a foine place."

No answer.

"I dunnot know as I ever see a Lunnoner afore, if so be as tha's a Lunnoner born an' bred," continued

John, using, as he always did, the phraseology of those blessed with sight. "Tha dunnot talk mooch, mester."

"Don't I? Well, I am not sure that talking ever does any good."

This reply aroused the argumentative Lancashire spirit.

"I dunno so mooch about that. Sithee, what's public opinion but talking If theer wurna talking theer'd be no public opinion. Art tha going to turn up thy nose at public opinion? Eh, mester, tha's getten howd o' th' wrong end o' th' stick this toime."

The stranger laughed again. A pleasant laugh, but it ruffled John.

"Ay, but tha has, I tell thee, an' tha conna deny it. Look at th' papers—a' gossip! I conna read 'em mysen, but I con hear other folk read 'em. I often hear bits o' th' *Woffendale Star,* an' theer's a mort o' news in it. Would tha do away wi' papers, an' ha' folk howd their tongues fur a' th' world like th' dumb beasts? I reckon th' Almighty meant folk to talk, else we couldna do it—theer!"

No comment from the stranger.

"I see tha's getten nowt to say," observed John with a chuckle. "When it cooms to argyment, mester, tha dunnot seem mooch o' a hond at it. That's th' way wi' a many. They're sharp enow at contradicting, but when a mon tackles 'em—eh, dear! they shut up as tight as a rat-trap. Theer's th' station reet afore thee. Dost tha see th' signal lights?"

"Yes, I see them, thank you. Here are the five shillings."

"I'm mooch obliged. Tha con coom this way again

i' a fog as soon as tha pleases. I'll be glad to guide thee. I shall know thee quick enow."

"Know me?" said the stranger, in tones of surprise, stopping in the act of turning away.

"Ay, to be sure. Why not? Dost tha think that because I conna see I conna tell one mon fro' another? I'll warrant I'd know thy voice anywheres."

"Well good-night! and good luck to our next meeting."

The unknown walked away towards the signal lights. Blind John resumed his journey to the farm, shaking his head now and then in a manner that indicated grave disapproval of his late companion.

He duly arrived at the farm, received his sixpence and the supper he had anticipated, and set off homewards in a serene and comfortable frame of mind.

"Theer'll be toime fur half an hour at th' Wolf," he muttered to himself as he plodded unerringly through the fog; past deep pools, past treacherous patches of trembling bog, where a yard to left or right would have plunged him in without hope of succour. He had nearly reached home, had turned into the track leading off the moor, and past the little inn to Wildersmoor station, when his guiding stick struck against something soft. He stopped. Then touched it again with his stick.

"I conna make out," he said, and stooping, passed his hand cautiously over the object lying in front of him. "It's a mon! He mun be drunk. He's getten a great-coat, an' a good un. He mun be a gentleman. His hat's gone. Ay, an' he's getten curly hair, an' it's wet," feeling carefully, "wet wi summat sticky. Eh, dear, happen it's blood! He's hurt hissen i' fall-

ing." John straightened himself and pondered a moment. The innate caution of the blind made him slow in deciding upon a course of action.

"I'll go on to th' Wolf. Ay, that'll be best."

And stepping over the prostrate form he plodded onwards. In ten minutes he passed under the swinging sign, whereon some bygone local artist had depicted a shaggy animal, pale of hue and terrific of aspect, into the cheerful blaze of a mighty fire—a real north-country fire, filling the huge grate and roaring half-way up the chimney. The landlord, Matthew Vose, was dispensing "sixpenny" to several customers, and greeted John as he entered—

"Well, owd lad, I thought it wur about toime fur thee to drop in. Theer's a seat fur thee in th' Snug," jerking his thumb towards the parlour behind the bar.

"Thank ye, but I conna set in it yet. Some on you mun coom wi' me. Theer's a mon lying on th' road nigh here. He's drunk or summat. I felt his head an' it wur wet. Look at my hond." And he held it out.

"Eh, mon!" ejaculated the landlord, snatching up an oil lamp and holding it near, "it's blood!"

"I thowt so," returned John complacently. "It isna often as I'm mistook in owt."

"Let's ha' a look," said another man. "Ay, th' chap mun ha' struck again summat in falling. It's lucky tha stumbled o'er him. This is noan the neet to be lying on Wildersmoor."

Here Vose, followed by three or four men, reappeared from the Snug, where he had been relating the news.

"These chaps is coming," he said, "are you fellys

coming too? William," to a lad who was part ostler, part pot-boy, "bring along them two lanterns, an' fetch th' short ladder. It'll do to carry him on."

The party sallied out, Blind John leading. Their progress was necessarily slow, by reason of the fog and their being obliged to follow John's deliberate steps.

"This here's a frosty un," remarked one, alluding to the mist. "Th' rime'll be as thick as snow to-morrow."

"Ay, lad, tha'rt reet. We're getten on th' moor now." It was the landlord who spoke. "Is it fur, John?"

"Nay, tha'll be alongside o' th' chap in a minute."

More silent trudging, then John halted: "Theer he is!"

The others crowded round, William and the landlord throwing the light of the lanterns on the pallid face.

"Eh, it's Mr. Ralph Fleming!" exclaimed the lad. And Vose echoed in consternation,

"Ay, it is, an' I'm feart he's dead. Chaps, this here's a bad business."

"Mr. Ralph!" repeated Blind John. "Art tha sure he's dead? Happen he's only knocked hissen dazed-like."

"He's dead for sure. An' look at th' crack he's getten on his head," said another. "He never could ha' done that hissen! Theer's nowt to hit agen. Hond o'er one o' them lanterns an' I'll glimpse round a bit."

"Tha'll lose thysen, tha fool!" remarked a friend, warningly.

"Na, I willna. I'm noan going but a yard off."

He groped about while the others lifted Ralph Fleming and laid him on the ladder they had brought. Not an easy task; all the Flemings were tall and heavy men.

"Chaps!" cried the searcher, "I've found th' stick as did it, an' it's Mr. Ralph's own. I con see 'R. F.' on it."

He held in the light of the lanterns a strong cane, the loaded end stained with blood. Vose examined it closely.

"Ay," he said, drawing a long breath, "it's murder! That's what it is."

"It's easy to see how it wur done," observed the finder of the cane. "Th' felly mun ha' snatched yon stick and throw'd it down when he run off."

"An' I con tell thee th' mon as did it," said Blind John, suddenly. He had been a silent and attentive listener. "As I wur going o'er the moor to th' Moss Farm to-neet, a chap coom up wi' me. He wur noan so civil till he found I wur blind, when he asked me to take him to North Rode station, an' I did, an' he give me five shilling. He wur a close chap. He wouldna say who he wur, nor wheer he wur bred, nor owt. But he wur a stranger, an' he owned up as he coom fro' Lunnon."

"Would tha know him again, John?"

"Ay, anywheer. Th' impident nowt! he wur wishing good luck to our next meeting. I reckon it willna be a lucky meeting fur him! He'd a voice I'd know again in a minute. It wurna a bad sort o' voice," added John, grudgingly, as the remembrance of those laughing, musical tones rose on his mind. "He wur young—I'm sure o' that. An' he wur in a rare hurry."

"Belike he wur," said Vose. "It's like enow a mon 'ud be in a hurry when he's getting out o' th' way o' th' hangman! Th' Woffendale police ought to know o' this. See here, we mun take Mr. Ralph to th' Hall. Happen he wur going theer, Mr. Quentin will know what to do. He'll ha' a noice job to tell owd Elkanah o' this—ay, he will that!"

"I dunno as th' owd chap 'll take it to heart o'er mooch," said another man. "Mr. Ralph wur a bit o' a wastrel, tha knows."

"That's true enow, an' I conna say I liked un myself. But wastrel or no wastrel, a mon dunnot like his son knocked on th' head in a fog. I'll warrant owd Elkanah 'll pretty nigh raise a' Woffendale. Heave up th' ladder, lads. Lead on, John."

CHAPTER II

WILDERSMOOR HALL was an old many-gabled ivy-covered building, roomy and comfortable, with latticed windows and dark oaken floors. It stood on the lower slope of the Pike, where the ground rose from the moorland. In front of the house, within the curve of the drive, was a lawn—mossy as lawns only can be on the western coast; and on either side of it and across the end of the gates, a double row of pines stood darkly against the sky. They were in perfect harmony with the old house and the wild moor they faced. In summer and in winter—whether warm breezes rustled and whispered through their branches, or bitter winds wailed and whistled round them, always the same. Not that there was anything gloomy about the trees, but rather an idea of cheerful friendliness. When all else was withered and bare, the pines' warm red trunks and blue-green foliage gave to the wild landscape the one touch of colour that it needed.

The drive, after circling the lawn, went round to the back of the house through the grounds, finally joining a wide wheel-track that led from the moor to the high-road. Where the track merged into the road stood the little wayside station of Wildersmoor. The station, the inn, a few cottages, and one or two farms, were the only habitations nearer than North Rode. The Flemings—a branch of the Cumberland Flemings—had lived for generations at Wildersmoor Hall. The

present owner, Quentin Fleming, was a young man, not yet thirty. His late father and his uncle Elkanah were the firm of Fleming and Fleming, of the Atlas Ironworks in Woffendale; and on the death of the elder Fleming, Quentin inherited a large fortune and also succeeded to his father's position as partner in the firm. The third member of the Fleming family was Ralph, son of Elkanah and cousin to Quentin. Most people looked askance at Ralph Fleming, and with reason; and old Elkanah's rage and disappointment culminated about every six months in a sharp quarrel between father and son, the father having a violent temper and the son possessing every other bad quality in addition. Ralph's mother—like his cousin's—having died years ago, there was no one to smooth matters except Quentin, who had, however, generally managed to patch up a hollow truce between the belligerents. But of late Ralph had become so oblivious of everything save his own evil ways that the cousins had drawn apart. In truth, there was a deeper gulf between Quentin, who was the soul of honour, and Ralph, who was totally ignorant of what honour meant, than between Elkanah and his son.

"A pity the lads cannot be shaken up together," old Elkanah would grumble occasionally. "A little of the starch taken out of Quentin, and a trifle of it added to Ralph, and we'd get along firstrate. If anything went wrong with the Works, my nephew would pay up every penny owing if he had to go barefoot to do it. And my son would scrape up all the cash he could lay his hands on and lose the whole in ten minutes betting. And I'll be shot if know which would be the bigger fool!"

From this speech a stranger might have formed a tolerably accurate diagnosis of the characters of all three men. But now, Ralph was dead on Wildersmoor, and his bearers were carrying him through the white fog to the Hall, where Quentin sat thinking darkly of their last quarrel. While in Woffendale, old Elkanah was entertaining at dinner a few of his ancient cronies, and consulting them as to how he should make his will so that Ralph would inherit a fortune and a share of the business, yet not be able to squander the one or ruin the other: a problem that had kept his lawyer hard at work for the last eighteen months, as no document he had hitherto compiled entirely satisfied the old man.

When Matthew Vose and his party reached the Hall gates, the landlord stopped:

"Howd on a minute, lads. I reckon I'd best go in an' break it like."

The men halted beneath the pines while Vose, taking a lantern, groped his way along the drive to the door.

"Is Mr. Fleming in?" he asked of the servant. But as he spoke Quentin himself came out of the library.

"If you cross Scot and Norse," said Gilbert of Ghent, "you get a very big man." Doubtless Quentin Fleming's mingled northern ancestry accounted for his height and breadth. He was a very big man, fair and sunburnt, with closely cropped fair hair and dark grey eyes that at night appeared almost black. They were kindly eyes, too, that smiled with the mouth, whose pleasant curves were hidden under a heavy fair moustache.

"What is it, Vose?" he asked, seeing the landlord

standing in the doorway, the white fog eddying past him into the hall in pale coiling wreaths.

"Well, sir, it's Mr. Ralph. He has met with an accident, or worse. Blind John found him lying on th' moor."

"An accident?" repeated Quentin. "Is he badly hurt? Where is he?"

"We've getten him here," with a backward jerk of his thumb towards the gates. "I'm feart, sir, that it's a bad business. It's all o'er with Mr. Ralph. Theer's a crack on his head that has let out the soul, sure enow."

Quentin uttered an exclamation and hurried out, followed by Vose, who threw the light of a lantern on the dead man's face as his cousin bent over him.

Those of the men who were not holding the ladder drew back respectfully, but after that one horror-struck exclamation Fleming said no more either of horror or regret.

He directed the bearers to carry Ralph into the library, and wrote out a telegram, telling the groom to get a lantern and take the message to the station: "It is just possible he may not be dead. This must go to Dr. McKie at once. There is no one nearer."

"Theer's the vet," suggested a bearer in a hoarse whisper, nudging Vose. "He's a graidly hond at doctoring hosses. Happen he'd be better than nowt?"

Vose shook his head.

"It's all o'er," he replied in a low tone. Then aloud to Fleming,

"Blind John 'll take that telegram quickest, sir, slow though he be; for this fog is like a blanket afore a mon's eyes."

"True. Is John here?"

He was standing in the hall in his usual attitude of patient waiting, holding his stick before him, listening intently to all that went on.

"I thowt I might be wanted again," he observed when Quentin addressed him, "fur theer never wur a worse fog nor this. Ay, I'll go o'er to th' station an' anywheer else. Eh, dear!—but whatten a job, Mr. Quentin!—whatten a job!"

"Yes."

"Vose 'll tell thee about th' chap as I led o'er to North Rode," continued John, as he tapped his way down the steps into the chill night air. "Eh, if I'd ha' known I'd ha' led him safe to th' police, fur it wur him as did it, sure enow."

The rest of the men, receiving Quentin's thanks with deprecatory murmurs of "Eh, sir, it's nowt!"—filed out after John and took their way back to the inn, groping cautiously along with the aid of a lantern.

"If we arena there when tha cooms, John, tha mun start out an' look fur us!"

"Ay—ay," came from that part of the fog wherein John had disappeared.

Vose had remained in obedience to a sign from Fleming.

"I'm afraid, sir, theer 'll be naught to be done. Mr. Ralph is gone."

Quentin turned away with a groan and leant his elbow on the mantelpiece.

For a moment there was silence in the room, save for the crackling of the fire and the low ticking of the clock. Vose felt surprised that Ralph Fleming's death should so affect his cousin, for as the landlord afterwards remarked, "It wur hard work fur to find

owt good to say o' Mr. Ralph, fur a' one liked to be civil to a murdered mon." And reflecting on this undeniable fact, he ventured to offer a few words of consolation. "It might be worse, sir," he said, respectfully. "It's bad enow, but it might ha' been someone that couldna be so well spared as Mr. Ralph —begging his pardon!"

"What is this about a stranger whom Blind John guided across the moor?" asked Quentin, turning round.

Whereupon Vose told all he knew about the mysterious traveller whose secrecy had appeared so suspicious to his guide. "John says he'd know the mon again, an' I think he would," finished Vose; "but, of course, th' chap 'll take care to keep out o' John's way. An' look at th' toime th' mon's had to get off! He'd catch th' seven train at North Rode, an' now it's nigh on ten."

"I'm going to the station to meet Dr. McKie. Can you wait here till he comes? He may wish to hear how you found my cousin."

Vose expressed his willingness to wait any time, all night if necessary, but ventured a remonstrance respecting the fog.

"It's like a blanket, sir. You'll never find th' station. Blind John 'll surely be back in a minute. He ought to ha' been here afore now."

The fact was that John, after despatching the telegram, had lingered to relate to the station-master all that had happened; and had then looked in at the Wolf to see whether his late companions had reached there in safety. So that he was but just approaching the Hall gates when Fleming turned out of them

"Did that telegram go directly, John?" called Quentin, hearing the tapping stick, though its owner was concealed by the fog.

"Oh, ay, Mr. Quentin," coming up; "I wur going to ask if I hadna best meet th' doctor at th' station."

"I am going. You have done enough walking for to-night."

"Nay—nay!" exclaimed John, who was enjoying himself thoroughly. "Th' walking's nowt. I'd best coom. Thee's bound to lose thysen, an' I should ha' a rare job to find thee—big as thou art. An' I hannot told thee about th' chap I took o'er th' moor. I'd like to tell thee mysen." And John recounted his adventures of the evening with much satisfaction while he plodded on, bringing the story to an end as the Woffendale train drew up beside the platform and Dr. McKie stepped out.

He was unmistakably North British: a kindly Scot, gaunt and grizzled, with a bare shining pate that—according to his own theory—was the chief cause of his success as a physician.

"A bald head," he would remark, "is a grand thing in the medical profession. Man!—it'sjust wonderfu' how it inspires confidence. A doctor may wear a beard as long as he pleases, but if his hair were as long as his beard he wadna pit a bawbee into his pocket. The maist of folk appear to have a prejudice against a good head of hair, and there's no denying that Scripture bears them out. Look at Absalom and Samson. Did they not baith come to a waeful end?"

"There was Elijah," Quentin had once suggested [illegible] when McKie was holding forth on

"Weel, yè canna say Elijah achieved any warldly success," the doctor had retorted triumphantly, his native Doric becoming stronger in the excitement of argument.

Whether owing to his bald head or not, Dr. McKie had certainly done well in Woffendale, so far as money was concerned. But a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth; and perhaps there had been a time long ago, when the old Scotchman had looked forward to a life different by far to the cheerless existence he led in the tall narrow Woffendale house looking out on the murky street; where his old Scotch housekeeper, as gaunt and grizzled as himself, kept him supplied with his national porridge, cock-a-leekie, and that queer dainty whereof the outside is hard as the heart of man, and the inside black with rich spice.

But whatever tangle of circumstance had kept Dr. McKie a bachelor, was known only to himself. He had come to Woffendale a stranger and had there settled down, speaking never of kith nor kin, making his way by natural shrewdness and skill.

With the Fleming family he had been on terms of intimate friendship for many years, and Quentin had always been his favourite. Therefore a message from Wildersmoor interested him more than ordinary and the one that summoned him to-night had been urgent.

"And what is the accident?" he inquired, as they stumbled towards the Hall in the fog. Then when Quentin told him—"Weel, he may have done it himself."

McKie had not, however, expected to find Ralph Fleming actually dead, grave though the words of the

telegram had been; and his face grew more serious as he heard all that had happened.

"Weel lad," he said to Quentin, after a brief examination of the body, "ye can console yourself with thinking naething could have saved your cousin. Mayhap, if a surgeon had been on the spot and stopped the bleeding he might have lived. But naebody but a surgeon could have done it. Yes, I see," as Vose showed him the blood-stained stick, "that is his own property. I know it well. The end is loaded. Yes, that would do it. But, ma certes!" looking again at the dead man's head, "it was a strong arm that struck that blow. Robbery no doubt, was the motive. His money and watch are on him, certainly, but that proves naething. The murderer might hear footsteps—Blind John's, for instance—and would fear to linger by the body. There will be an inquest of course, and it would be as well to let the police know soon. They might chance to catch that fellow, after all."

"I am going over to Woffendale to break this to my uncle," said Quentin, "and I thought of seeing the superintendent there."

"Nae, nae," said McKie, shaking his head. "Just send a message to the police-station, and let him come here and talk it over. Dinna disturb your uncle to-night. It's not far off eleven o'clock, and by the time ye get there, he'll be sleeping in peace. Let him rest till to-morrow, and I'll go with ye early, and help to tell him. I'm thinking, I'll stay here with ye to-night, Quentin, if there's no objection. Elspeth knows weel where I am if need be, and I'd like to see the police when they come."

"You know you are always welcome at Wilders-

moor, doctor. If you really think my uncle is best left in ignorance of what has happened——"

"I'm certain of that," interrupted McKie, with emphasis.

"Very well, then I will send a telegram to the police, as you suggest."

At last Blind John plodded homewards. He would cheerfully have spent the whole night in trudging; partly for the sake of the excitement it afforded him, and partly because a shining gold coin lay in his pocket, bestowed upon him by Fleming as guerdon for his labours.

"I hannot seen a sovereign fur many a day," he observed to Vose, who accompanied him on this last journey; "an' since Mr. Ralph is naught mooch to fret o'er, theer's no harm in saying it's an ill wind that blows nobody good. Tha'll not be shutting up th' Wolf th' minute tha gets back, wilt tha, Vose? It isna ower late yet, an' I mun ha' a pint o' sixpenny after a' this."

"Thee mun swallow it sharp, then," replied Vose; "I reckon tha'll ha' toime while I'm clearing th' chaps out. An' happen tha'll ha' a chance to earn a sixpence or two more if tha likes, fur if they've been sitting theer with only William to look after 'em, they'll noan be like to see their way whoam in broad dayleet, let alone in a fog."

When comparative quiet was restored in Wildersmoor Hall, Dr. McKie turned the key in the library-door, where was lying all that remained of Ralph Fleming.

"Have ye searched in his pockets for papers?" he

inquired, as he followed Quentin to the dining-room. Fleming shook his head.

"Weel, ye'd better; for whatever they are, they will be nae credit either to himself or his family."

But as Fleming still declined, the doctor remarked that, "As an auld friend, he'd do it himself," and went back to the library, whence he emerged a few minutes later with a pocket-book and a few letters.

"Here they are," he observed, laying them on the table. "Ye can either look over them yourself or give them to his father."

"I should prefer not examining them," said Quentin. "But if you would do so I should feel much obliged. Perhaps it would be better for someone to look at them before I take them to Woffendale."

"That is precisely my opinion," said McKie. "Why are ye pacing up and down the room like a caged lion? Ye take your cousin's death o'er much to heart, lad. I can see it in your face. For my part, it is just one of the few dispensations of Providence I can freely resign myself to. I'll look o'er these papers. They'll not take me a minute. And then I'll have a glass of toddy if ye'll ask me, Quentin."

"I am ashamed not to have done so sooner. I am so bewildered this evening that I never thought of it."

"Bide a wee," said the cautious North Briton as Fleming stretched out his hand to the bell. "It is as weel not to bring in servants till I have done with these. There's no telling how much may be seen at a glance."

He opened the pocket-book, commenting aloud upon its contents.

"A fair amount of money—yes—memoranda—nothing much—betting, and so on. Weel, the auld man can see that. Now for the letters—three of them. Here is one signed, 'J. Ulyett,' asking for money, and hinting that he has a right to expect it. It was written the day before yesterday. Ralph must have got it yesterday. It is dated from Driffield, and the writer says he will, perhaps, be in Woffendale shortly. Do ye know this Ulyett?"

"Yes; and so do you," taking the letter from McKie, "only you don't recollect him. You have met Jack Ulyett at the Rusholmes'. He is a relative of theirs. A nice fellow, but always coming to grief one way or another. He was with Marston and Co. in Driffield, but that has fallen through; so he is off to the West Coast."

"Just wanting in stability," commented McKie. "I remember him now. That sort are the rank and file of the human army, and need to be under a strong commander. There will be no occasion to show that to Mr. Fleming, so far as I can judge. If the laddie has relations in Woffendale, he'd rather they didn't hear of his affairs, and your uncle would be pretty sure to tell them, for there are bitter words in that letter. I don't doubt Ralph deserved them; but ye know, Quentin, that auld Elkanah thinks naebody should wag a tongue but himself."

Quentin dropped the letter into the blaze. For a moment it was transparent, the handwriting showing blackly. The next instant it shrivelled, and was gone. But in that moment a single sentence had stood out clearly before McKie's eyes. He had read it a few minutes earlier, but it had not then conveyed to his

mind the significance it seemed to bear as it glowed there in the flame.

"I never thought of that!" he cried, making a snatch at the letter. Too late. It was gone.

"I didn't say burn it!" continued McKie, in great excitement. "Dinna ye see, lad, how it might be? Those words that stared me in the face but now—aye—out of the fire! It was evidence—that letter. Daft auld gomeril that I am!"

"I understand your suspicion," said Fleming, quietly; "but you are wrong. Whether Ulyett came to Woffendale to-day or not, he never murdered Ralph. He would not harm a fly."

"Lad, ye canna tell. Want of money oft makes desperate men out of the softest. Ye say this Ulyett had friends and yet was always in difficulty. Now I ask ye, what was to hinder him coming to Woffendale to-day, as he proposed to do? How can ye tell that he did not follow Ralph here and have sharp words with him on the moor? How can ye tell yon Ulyett was not the stranger that Blind John led and did not recognize? He would be a stranger to John. He only stayed now and then in Woffendale. Dinna ye see how it all fits like the bits of a puzzle? And we can both bear witness to the letter."

"No," interrupted Quentin, leaning against the mantelpiece and looking down at McKie as he sat in an easy-chair before the fire, his hard features aglow with excitement; "you must pardon me, doctor, but I am so convinced of Ulyett's entire innocence that nothing will induce me to utter a word that would cast the faintest suspicion upon him."

"There's the letter," said McKie, emphatically.

"We will not mention it."

"Not?"—McKie leant back and stared at Fleming in speechless amazement.

"I think not," repeated Quentin, deliberately.

If McKie had the North British obstinacy he had also the North British shrewdness and caution. In his place old Elkanah Fleming would have pooh-poohed any opposition to his own ideas, and would have persisted in detailing to the first policeman who arrived the contents of the letter and his own deductions therefrom. Not so McKie. He did not for a moment swerve from his own conviction that there was ground for suspicion against Ulyett; but he felt that Quentin spoke as one having authority and he recognized that he himself might be groping among pitfalls of which he knew nothing—deep pools veiled from his eyes by mists of ignorance.

"Of course," Fleming resumed after a pause, "I have no right to appear to dictate to you in this matter, but it is a terrible thing to charge an absolutely innocent man with a crime. I cannot permit Ulyett to be perhaps arrested. His very embarrassments would tell against him."

"Naturally," responded McKie, dryly. "Nevertheless, since ye put it so strongly, lad, I am willing to let the matter rest awhile. Here are the other two letters. I see Aveland's handwriting on one, so I'll open it first." Fleming made a swift movement as though to take from McKie the letter he was slowly unfolding. He checked himself apologetically, but with an angry knitting of the brows.

"I seem to be perpetually contradicting you this

evening, doctor, yet I am not sure that we ought to read Dr. Aveland's correspondence."

McKie paused and considered a moment. "I think, under the circumstances, we may be allowed to do so. Aveland is not the man to have anything to say to your cousin that the whole world might not hear, and the letter may explain the reason of Ralph being on the moor to-night. So, with your permission, Quentin, I'll just look at it."

Fleming offered no further opposition. He knew the gist of that letter. He had heard of it already.

"Short, and to the purpose, and very proper," was McKie's comment. "Will ye read it?" holding out the note.

Fleming shook his head.

"Then I'll tell ye. It's just this. Ralph seems to have been going over to Sandhayes—intruding there, in fact; and Aveland just tells him roundly that his presence is not desired. Depend upon it, that is what brought Ralph here to-night. He was going to Sandhayes to remonstrate. The assurance of one like him—for worthless he was—lifting his eyes to such a bonnie lassie as Aveland's daughter! I would have got up and forbid the banns myself. I suppose she will be going away to relations down south when her father dies. Weel, I shall miss the sight of her face."

"Is Dr. Aveland worse? He did not seem worse when I saw him yesterday."

"I'll not say worse," returned McKie, cautiously, "but he canna last long, and he may go off any minute. He will keep up to the last. Ah, that is just a dispensation of Providence I canna agree with. There are plenty of natural-born rascals that could we

spared, and it's a real loss to the world that Aveland should leave it, and a terrible loss to his daughter."

Here the North Briton paused and looked up at Quentin.

"I have often wondered," he began, then stopped, checked by something in the young man's face. It needed a keen observer to detect the faint change of expression, yet McKie saw it, and felt instinctively that he must not finish the sentence.

"Here is the third letter and the last," he said. "A very uneducated hand, and signed 'Rossela.' Um! —precisely what I suspected when that girl disappeared from Wildersmoor. She tells Ralph that Ulyett had called to see him, and was much put out by not finding him there. Ye see, Quentin, how everything points to Ulyett as the man who crossed the moor with Blind John. He was first vexed at not seeing Ralph in Driffield. Then he writes that letter which is, unfortunately, burnt. Then, no doubt, he comes to Woffendale, finds Ralph here, they quarrel about the money, and there ye are!"

"No," said Fleming. "Ulyett never touched Ralph."

"Weel, I agreed to let the matter rest awhile, and so I will. Nevertheless, I have my opinion," shaking his head. "As for Rossela Darlow—the girl was always a bad lot. There never was any mistake about that. And, I daresay, she has feathered her nest pretty well. I should say ye can show this letter to auld Elkanah or not at your discretion. By itself it does not incriminate Ulyett at all. And now, Quentin, I'll take my toddy, if ye'll kindly order it."

CHAPTER III

WOFFENDALE is one of those Caves of Despair that men construct for themselves and their fellows. God Almighty never created such a den of dirt. The wild thyme spreads its scented carpet alike for king and beggar, and the wild bird sings its song. But carpet and song and every sweetness and consolation of life are denied to poverty in the brick and mortar cave called a manufacturing town. There the hard pavement only is under the tired feet, the jarring noise of crowded humanity the only song for the tired ears, and day by day, rich and poor alike—deprived of the restful eternal pleasures provided for them in the glory of earth and sky—grow more and more rabid for amusement, and less and less capable of enjoyment.

"I cannot tell him," said Quentin, as he and McKie got out at Woffendale Station the next morning, and turned into the wide dingy street that led to Elkanah Fleming's house.

"I will do it," said McKie. "I expected to have to do it myself. But I canna see why ye should trouble owre much. If Ralph had been your ain brother, instead of just a cousin, and one no weel disposed towards ye either, ye could not fash yoursel mair about it. Ye look pale under your tan, lad, and your e'en are owre bright. There is Rusholme. I will ask him to come with us."

John Rusholme, a well-known and respected Woffendale merchant, was an old friend of the Fleming family. He came up with the evident intention of speaking to Quentin and Mr. McKie, and his face was grave.

"I heard a rumour this morning of Ralph Fleming's death," he said. "Surely it is not true?"

"Unhappily it is," said Quentin. "We thought—I hoped—you would help us to tell my uncle."

"Certainly—certainly! I am sincerely grieved. Not that Ralph was all he should be, but one always hopes for reformation, and he was an only child. How did it happen?"

McKie related the story as the three walked up the street. The news was evidently spreading fast, for several people stopped them to ask if it were so.

"How could anyone in Woffendale know so soon?" Quentin uttered the question almost impatiently, a rare mood for one so even-tempered as he.

McKie glanced at him.

"What does it matter, lad? The whole town will know in an hour. And what does it matter?"

"No, it does not matter," Fleming returned, absently.

"I imagine," said Rusholme, in his slow grave tones, "that the news first reached us by way of the railroad. My wife heard it from one of the maids, and she had been told by a porter. I have no doubt," addressing Quentin, "that the men at the Works are discussing it already."

"I daresay," replied Quentin, looking up at the smoke-darkened stone house which was the end of

their journey. Was it only yesterday that he had walked up to this house in like manner? No, not in like manner. A century of feeling divided then from now.

Elkanah Fleming received the news of his son's death as Vose had predicted. After the first stunned incredulity, he was not so much overwhelmed by grief as transported with rage that Ralph should have been murdered, and yet the murderer have escaped. Elkanah's ruling idea was to seek out the man and have the satisfaction of handing him over to the police. This state of mind was infinitely less painful to his friends than crushing grief would have been, though his denunciations greatly shocked Mrs. Holt, the widowed sister-in-law, who had kept his house since his wife's death.

"Pray, Elkanah, restrain yourself. It is not the manner in which to bear such an affliction."

"Affliction, Maria!" roared her brother-in-law, "this is a murder!—a foul abominable murder! And I'll see the rope round the scoundrel's neck yet. Quentin, I'll come to the Hall with you now. You say the police are there, don't you? Besides, I'd like to see——," his voice failed for a moment. "Yes, I'll come at once. Are you going, McKie? Patients want you, I suppose. Well, turn in again this evening, will you? Come to dinner. I should like to talk this over with you."

"Elkanah," said Mrs. Holt, "is poor Ralph to be brought here?"

"Of course—of course. Quentin will explain. Just come into my study, Rusholme, and help me to write out an offer of reward. I can leave it at the printer's

on my way to the station. Posters must be got out at once. No good relying on the police. They are always useless in these cases."

He went out of the room followed by Rusholme, and McKie took the opportunity of telling Mrs. Holt that the inquest would be held at Wildersmoor.

"I am sure I am very glad," she said plantively, "though it is very disagreeable for you, Quentin."

"Anything that I can do——" said Quentin, and stopped.

"I know you will," replied Mrs. Holt, putting her handkerchief to her eyes. "It troubles me dreadfully to think of the terribly unprepared state of dear Ralph. Then, too, his being murdered, and the inquest. Not —er—quite nice for the family."

"No," assented McKie, stonily, "it is not usually considered nice—not at all. I am afraid I'll have to leave ye now, Mrs. Holt. My patients will be hoping I am not coming."

"But we shall see you to dinner, Dr. McKie?"

"Assuredly. I am entirely at the disposal of Mr. Fleming and yourself."

He drew Quentin into the hall.

"The auld man takes it in the best way—the way of action. Let him do what he likes about the reward. It gives him something to think of, something to do, and so relieves a strain that might be dangerous, ye see. There may be a reaction by-and-by. Meanwhile he is all right. I'll look in on him when he comes back with ye from Wildersmoor, and I'll dine with him this evening. If there is anything else ye want done, lad?——" McKie paused, inquiringly.

"There is nothing I can remember just now, thank

you, doctor. I am very grateful for all you have done."

"Weel, don't let it worry ye, and I'll take that as my fee."

The door had hardly closed behind him when the elder Fleming reappeared. "McKie gone? Off to his patients, eh? Look here, Quentin. Rusholme and I think this will do," holding out a paper.

"Your uncle," said Rusholme, "wished to name a higher sum. But I consider five hundred pounds enough when offered for finding the man who went to North Rode with Blind John. We are not sure that the stranger is the murderer."

"Not sure!" exclaimed Elkanah. "Rusholme, I'll stake my life on it. Of course, that fellow is my son's murderer."

"I believe he is," replied Rusholme, "but we cannot be absolutely certain. Five hundred is enough. It will be easy to raise it at any time if you should decide to do so. I need not say I think the offer of reward a wise step. It will stimulate the police for one thing, and may perhaps induce them to regard a man's life as of almost the same value as his watch. Do you go to Wildersmoor now?"

Elkanah nodded.

"Come with us, Rusholme."

"I am afraid I hardly can. But I will see to these being printed," touching the paper in his hand. "That will save you a little time and trouble, and I will look in when you return."

Elkanah nodded again.

"I am much obliged. Yes, come again this afternoon. I shall be back about three."

"And will you ask dear Esmé if she can spend to-day with me, Mr. Rusholme?" said Mrs. Holt. "It would be a great consolation to me to have her."

"I am sure she will be most happy to come," replied Esmé's father. "Our sympathy with you is very great."

Which was true. The Rusholmes had rather hoped to see Esmé the wife of Ralph Fleming. Not that Ralph was exactly an amiable—or even a decent—character, but if Esmé wished to reform him, it was not for her parents to object. It is but just to Mr. and Mrs. Rusholme to say that they would not for a moment have urged, or even advised, their daughter to marry Ralph. They were simply acquiescent. A higher degree of virtue could not be expected from them. The Fleming wealth was immense, and Ralph's father and aunt evidently favoured the marriage, or Esmé would not have been so constantly invited to the house. A day had seldom passed without Mrs. Holt sending for her, either to drive or to dine and spend the evening. Therefore Ralph Fleming's unexpected death came as a shock to the Rusholme household. Perhaps Mr. Rusholme had hardly realized how much he had counted on the marriage till this morning, when he knew that fate had swept it into that vast rubbish heap of things that might have been. The thought of the chance that was lost followed him to his office; made itself evident in the note he sent to his daughter, giving her Mrs. Holt's message; haunted him all day. "It was a pity," he said to himself repeatedly, even while he tried to persuade himself that Esmé was better without such a husband as Ralph Fleming.

Old Elkanah, driving to the station with his nephew, alluded to the matter.

"Maria always set her mind on marrying poor Ralph to that eldest girl of Rusholme's. I don't know that I should have objected. She is not much to look at, and a fool. But she might have managed Ralph. Well, you are the only one left now, Quentin," this with a suppressed groan.

Quentin listened silently, wishing for words wherewith to comfort the grieving father, yet knowing that he had none to offer—that he, of all men, could have none to offer. To him the events of the last sixteen or seventeen hours had been as a frightful dream. Surely awaking would come—that blessed awaking which never does comes after great calamity. For many days there would be for Quentin no dewy Aurora, but the heavy returning to consciousness of the great Florentine's Dawn, back from the mists of sleep to a darkened and troubled future. He never clearly remembered how that day passed. Vaguely he recollected taking his uncle to Wildersmoor; to the quiet library where that which had been Ralph was lying on the table. He recalled, too, Blind John, standing in the hall as he had stood the night before; repeating as it seemed interminably the story of his walk through the fog with the stranger. There was also Vose, who took up John's story when it stopped at the Grey Wolf; and the deferential police inspector. All these passed before Quentin as phantasmagoria; and ever beyond them—more distinct than all—was that stark figure lying in the library. It seemed to be always present; to be listening to each voice that told the tale of its earthly ending, or debated the manner in which it

had parted with life, and detailed the fruitless seeking for the unknown murderer. For the search had failed, and the inspector met blandly the anger of Elkanah Fleming, explaining the reasons of failure.

"You see, sir, our hope was that the officials at North Rode would be able to describe and identify the man, but they are positive no stranger left the station either by the seven or any other train that evening. Therefore we think he must have walked on to Riverton along the line, guided by the fence and unseen in the fog. So now we do not know whether he was dark or fair, tall or short. Blind John says he was young, by his step, and John may be right, but that one fact is not much to go upon. Whoever he was he must have followed Mr. Ralph from Wildersmoor station, where he arrived at five o'clock from Woffendale. At that time the fog was not so dense. Doubtless the increasing fog emboldened the fellow to attack Mr. Ralph. He may have demanded money, or attempted to snatch his watch, and, failing, must have wrenched Mr. Ralph's stick from him and struck him with it. The end is loaded. Perhaps Mr. Ralph threatened him with it. The blow may have been only intended to stun—not to kill. Then something appears to have startled the murderer. He fled away through the fog and naturally lost himself. Or, if he was no thief, but a personal enemy of Mr. Ralph's, he would hasten away from the spot through fear of detection. Thanks to the fog nobody saw him come, nobody saw him go; and the ground is too frozen for any footprints. In fact, sir, we have absolutely no clue whatever. Blind John says he should recognize the man's voice. Well, if he ever does, we may hit upon something. But as

John told the man he should know him again, we may be sure that the fellow will keep out of John's way. Of course, we shall do our utmost, sir; but I confess that unless some fresh evidence turns up, we see little chance of discovering the man."

"Somebody must have seen him at the station here," said Elkanah.

"Unfortunately, sir, the tickets were taken by a young boy who is a complete stranger to the neighbourhood and who was so engrossed by the—to him—novel responsibility that he did not notice the passengers who got out except to be careful that they gave him their tickets. You see, sir, the night was foggy, and the lad had only a lantern by the gate, so that it is natural he would not notice those who passed when they were all strangers to him. There were several third class tickets and one first. We have supposed the first to be Mr. Ralph's."

"What makes you suggest that my son might have had a personal enemy? Of whom are you thinking?"

"Oh, not of anyone in particular, sir, oh—no. Only—" with a little deprecatory cough—"Mr. Ralph might have had a personal enemy."

Ralph Fleming was likely to have had a good many personal enemies, and of an unscrupulous class, too. His father knew this as well as anybody. He appealed to Quentin.

"Cannot you hit upon anyone who would be likely to owe Ralph a grudge?" But Quentin shook his head. Elkanah turned to the inspector again.

"You know, Hills," he said, authoritatively, "you police are far too apt to let a thing of this sort quietly slide when you cannot discover the man immediately.

You take more trouble over a burglary than over a murder. Now, I am going to have placards printed and distributed, offering five hundred pounds reward for the finding of the man who crossed the moor with John here; and I'll double that sum when the man is convicted. We'll see what that will do. If you like to earn it, well and good. I don't care who gets the money so long as I get the scoundrel hanged. But you must bestir yourself, Hills."

"No exertion on our part will be spared, Mr. Fleming."

"I hope so—I hope so. Quentin, I may as well be going back to town. It is getting on for three o'clock, and I have several things to attend to. Are you coming with me?"

"Yes, I thought of going to the Works."

"Do, and take with you a copy of the reward. Read it to the hands, or get somebody else to do it for you. The placards cannot be printed in a minute, and the offer cannot be too soon known. I'll write it out on a slip of paper for you."

Elkanah went into the dining-room, and the inspector, relieved by his absence, drew a little nearer to the wide hall fireplace where the leaping flames were putting to shame the pale wintry sunshine that streamed in through the long windows. Quentin, though silent, looked sympathetic; and the much-worried Hills unburdened his mind to him.

"You see yourself, sir, how little we have to go upon. Merely a suspicion of the man whom Blind John guided, and no clue even to that man save John's recollection of his voice"—rubbing his chin and gazing perplexedly at the fire. "Of course, we would do our

utmost, but what are we to do? It is natural Mr. Fleming should take on so—quite natural, and the reward is handsome. But I doubt its bringing anything to light."

"Chance may help you," said Quentin.

"It may; sir, it may. Nothing else will, you may depend upon that. This morning I walked over every step of the way from here to North Rode with Blind John showing me the path they took, in hopes of finding something the stranger might have dropped—a handkerchief or envelope, or anything that might afford a clue. But I had no luck—no luck!"

Quentin looked at Hills' honest perplexed face, and wondered if in the end he would have thought it luck had he picked up a handkerchief or envelope belonging to the stranger. For a moment Fleming felt a violent desire to laugh outright. How they all lost themselves in a labyrinth of their own conjectures. Yet how simple it really was, no labyrinth at all. How easy to explain, to set Hills right in one—no, two—three words. And the mocking devil within urged Quentin to say them. Had he said them? He pulled himself together as one falling out of an evil dream. Had he laughed? No, for there was Hills still rubbing his chin, staring at the fire as though the babbling flame were telling the secret in an unknown tongue. And there was the stillness about the library door: the stillness that ever seemed to be gathering itself tangibly —becoming a listening Presence.

"It's a queer thing," said Hills. "There is no denying Mr. Ralph had plenty to wish him ill, but I cannot, so to speak, hit upon anyone who would be likely to follow and kill him. There is the girl Rossela

Darlow, whose grandmother lives close by. I had a sort of idea she might have had a quarrel with Mr. Ralph since she went away, and she's a bad lot, and revengeful. But Mr. Fleming tells me there was a letter from her found on Mr. Ralph that shows no ill-feeling, and she has not left Driffield. Besides, even a strong young woman could never have given such a blow. So we are driven to think it must have been done by the man whom Blind John took to North Rode; especially as he did not take the train there, but must have walked along the line to Riverton or Burne, and that looks queer to me—looks as though he wished to leave no trace behind him. He must have been strong, too, to strike Mr. Ralph down like that, for he was as tall as you, sir, only a bit slimmer. I have sent one of our men to Driffield to make inquiries. Mr. Ralph was backwards and forwards there a good deal."

"He had a shooting-box on the moors," said Quentin.

"So I have understood, sir. We may hear something there," doubtfully.

Here Elkanah Fleming came out of the dining-room with two slips of paper.

"One each," he said, giving them to his nephew and the inspector. "The fellow who crossed the moor must be known to somebody who'll not be likely to keep his mouth shut when he hears he can get five hundred pounds, and perhaps twice that, by opening it."

"There are men who would not speak even for a thousand," said Quentin, folding up the paper and pocketing it.

"Precious few," rejoined his uncle. "Before that offer is a month old I shall have the monstrous villain safe in Woffendale gaol. You are all as apathetic as possible. If it were not for me there would be a few slipshod inquiries made and then dropped, and my son's murderer would remain another of the undetected criminals skulking about. But that is not my way," striking his fist on the black oaken table. "I shall neither rest nor die till I have found this man!" He pursued the subject in the train returning to Woffendale.

"Did you notice that Hills was ashamed to reply? He knows every word I say is true. Slipshod the whole lot of them. What are you saying, Quentin? Shall I want you again this evening? No, I think not. See about that paper being read at the Works. That is all I want done at present, lad."

By the time they reached the town, the short day was gone; the brief twilight merged in the smoke of Woffendale, where the glare of furnaces did not lighten, but deepened the murky gloom of the winter evening. Ralph Fleming's death had been generally known since early that morning, and, whether a man is liked or not, his violent death is sure to excite interest in the place where he has lived. There was a perceptible stir of suppressed eagerness throughout the Works that Quentin felt and understood as he went through the rooms. One or two heads of departments ventured to express a rough sympathy, and asked a question or two. He had decided on reading the paper himself. Why not? And he accordingly gave orders that the men should assemble in the yard five minutes before closing-time.

It was an expectant sea of faces that looked up at Quentin as he stood on the steps of the principal doorway, the light from within streaming out upon him into the night, his height and breadth looking almost gigantic in the confused mingling of brilliancy and gloom. Below, the light fell brightly here and there on the mass of men. Beyond it they stood in deep shadow, save where a flickering gaslight by the gate shed a feeble glimmer. There was a vague idea among the hands that Fleming intended to make a formal announcement of his cousin's death, accompanying it, probably, with a few moral reflections, and as much good as could be said of the dead man without calling up feelings of sardonic mirth in the listeners. "An' that'll not be mooch, neyther!" commented one burly fellow.

Then the various conjectures were hushed into silence as Quentin opened the slip of paper.

"You have all heard of my cousin's sad death," he said. "There is no need for me to tell you anything of that. Mr. Fleming has decided to offer a reward for the discovery of the murderer. To-morrow you will see the placards respecting it. Meanwhile, my uncle wishes me to read the notice to you."

Quentin's voice was one that carried well. Clear, yet soft, with a penetrating quality that travelled far without jarring the ears on which it struck, overcoming without difficulty the noisy rattle of the street beyond the silent yard where the men stood listening to the few brief sentences.

"That is all." He refolded the paper, looking down on the upturned faces. "That is all. But I am sure that without any inducement whatever, each one of

you would—if possible—hand over the murderer to the doom—" he paused a moment— "which he deserves."

Another silence followed, a silence quite different to the stillness in which they had hearkened to Elkanah's message and Quentin's words. That silence had been alert, this was meditative—nay, to a sensitive spirit there was even in it a faint suggestion of dissent.

"'Tis natural Mr. Fleming should take on about Mr. Ralph, being his son," tentatively observed the engineer, a strong, thickset fellow with a short black beard; "an' murder's a bad job, o' course, an' we're all main sorry for Mr. Fleming."

Here the speaker stopped, as not wishing to commit himself by expressing any decided opinion respecting the reward, and a murmur of approval went through the crowd.

"Mr. Fleming will be glad to have your sympathy. He will tell you so himself. Good-night!"

"Good-night, sir," echoed the men, as Quentin came down the steps, and, passing through the yard, went his way along the noisy street to the station, and so back to the hush of Wildersmoor and the mocking companionship of the dead man in the library.

Freed from the restraint of Quentin's presence, the Atlas hands commented freely upon the offered reward as they poured out of the yard.

"Five hundred pound—an' happen a thousand—isna bad. It 'ud set up a chap fur loife, an' owd Elkanah 'ud pay up sharp, too. If it wurna blood-money! Folks say it allus brings bad luck, but I think I'd risk it if I'd th' chance."

"I mout if I know'd who th' chap wur, an' what he

did it fur," opined another. " I dunnot say as I'd hond o'er a Woffendale mon to th' police, seeing what Mr. Ralph wur. Happen it's a stranger."

" I reckon we needna worrit oursen wi' thinkin' on't, lads," broke in the voice of the engineer, " fur it isna likely th' felly 'll tell o' hissen, an' how else can he be found out? Who's going to worrit a chap wi' nowt against him but Blind John's recollecting his voice? He's getten off scot free—that's about it. An', since somebody wur to be murdered, it's summat to be thankful fur as it wur Mr. Ralph—theer!"

CHAPTER IV

THE inquest was over, and the crowd of Wildersmoor and Woffendale folk who had attended dispersed to discuss the verdict of Wilful Murder with unabated interest. The Grey Wolf had so much custom that the landlord found it necessary to call in extra assistance.

"I dunnot know as I ever wur in such a doment," he remarked, as dusk closed in. "What wi' being wanted at the inquest, an' wanted here, an' wanted theer, an' borrowing beer mugs fro' th' neighbours fur such a many, I hannot had such a toime at th' owd Wolf in a' my loife!"

The Snug was full of guests that day, and Blind John repeated over and over again the details of his guidance of the stranger across Wildersmoor.

"Well," observed a listener, when John had reached the end of his story for about the twentieth time, "I allus say theer mun be summat bad about a mon when he willna tell folk wheer he wur born. Why dunnot he tell? It wurna his own doin'."

"Ay," agreed another, "tha'rt reet theer. I never did hold wi' strangers. Give me a chap as I've know'd when he wur a lad, an' his feyther an' mother, an' grandfeyther an' grandam, an' then I con tell pretty well what he'll be up to. You never con make out th' meaning o' a stranger's marlocks."

"I'll warrant theer'll be no more marlocks fur that

chap if so be as I ever coom across him again," said Blind John, emphatically.

"He'll keep out o' thy road, John."

"Happen he'll try to, but, see here, chaps," and John slapped his hands down on his knees and leant forward, speaking slowly and earnestly, "if things is to be, why, they is to be—isna that so?"

This appeal to the underlying fatalism in the north-country character was answered by a low murmur of assent.

"Ay," continued John, "that's it. Things is to be, an' you conna stop 'em. You may try to stop 'em, an' th' trying 'll be just what'll bring 'em to pass somehow. You conna get shut o' what is to be. Eh, theer weer Tony Balshaw—some on you'll recollect Tony—him as had th' Copse Farm. One morning his wife says to him, 'I wish thee would stay whoam to-day. I'd an ill dream o' thee. I dreamt I seed thee lying dead wi' a fir-tree atop o' thee.' 'Tha needna fret thysen, lass,' he says, 'fur I'm going o'er to Woffendale, an' I reckon theer's noan fir-trees theer.' So he went, an' as he wur going along Mill Street theer wur a waggon-load o' pine timber passing. Off cooms one o' th' wheels, an' down cooms th' whole load atop o' Tony, an' when they got him out he wur stone dead. You see, he thowt to be out o' th' way o' death, an' he ran reet into it. It's th' same wi' everything. It wur to be as Mr. Ralph wur to die, his toime had coom. It wur to be as I wur to lead that chap o'er Wildersmoor i' the fog. It wur to be as I wur to find Mr. Ralph as I coom whoam; an', mark you, th' toime 'll come when I'll hear that chap again. Ay, it'll coom, I tell thee, it'll coom—it's bound to coom!"

That same afternoon, when Ralph Fleming had been carried back to his father's house and the old Hall was free from the shadow of death, the Hall's master turned out of the gates and struck across the moor with long swift strides. There had been so much to attend to, so many people coming and going, that this—the end of the third day—was, as it were, the first breathing-space Fleming had had since Vose and his companions halted with their grim burden beneath the pines.

The December twilight was already closing in. A little chill wind rustled the withered fern and dry sedges by the frozen pools, and died away seaward in faint eerie sighs. Every leaf and twig and stem of the tawny fronds of the dead bracken, and the copper-coloured brambles was edged with powdery rime, that shook off in tiny crystals when the wind swayed the stiff branches to and fro over the shrivelled herbage and deep dark moss. A desolate scene, perhaps, to a stranger, but to Quentin the moor was as the face of a familiar friend, changing in expression —unchanging in feeling. So still and lonely, so grey and dim; waking up into flame now and then beneath the light of dawn or glow of sunset—only for a brief space, long enough to show what a flush and glory of colour there was on that dusky moorland. Then resuming its sad-hued garments of mist and shadow and grey cloud, as though it were dreeing its weird in silent endurance. Little wonder the Lancashire folk are such fatalists. There nature itself teaches them. Even the moaning wind coming up over the sandhills from the restless sea seems to whisper the resistlessness of fate. The great extent of moor made it soli-

tary. Its scanty population was not much given to walking, and the dwellers on the outlying farms preferred taking their holiday jaunts further afield. So it was possible to wander about for hours without meeting any human being, without even catching a glimpse of a distant figure making its way across the dusky expanse.

Fleming walked on in the gathering gloom, the darkening sky overhead, the steel-like gleam of the frozen pools beside him. He was almost as familiar with the moor as was Blind John, having wandered over it at all times and seasons; in the white dawn—at sunset—at dead of night; in warmth of summer and in winter snow: so that his feet mechanically led him whither he would go.

He was, perhaps, two miles from the Hall, when a figure came slowly from behind a clump of willows and into the path—an old woman with snow-white hair and piercing black eyes. She wore a long dark blue cloak, the hood drawn over her head. Quentin's hand involuntarily sought his pocket. It was winter, and Granny Darlow was poor, and, what is worse, old. For poverty may be remedied in a moment, but none can cure age save the magician Death. Granny was accounted a wise woman by the neighbourhood, but among the strange herbs she gathered on Wildersmoor there was none to lift the weight of years.

So being himself young and strong, and kindly disposed towards all living things, it was natural that Fleming should feel compassion for the old woman, giving her not only money—which may be thrown by anyone—but also the laughing sympathetic friendship which was Quentin's characteristic and the reason of

his popularity. He stood high in Granny Darlow's good opinion, higher than he was aware.

"He wur summat loike a mon—soul an' body," she would say to the Wildersmoor folk. "Most chaps has neither, as fur as I con make out!"

"Theer's Mr. Ralph, his cousin, nigh as big, if it's th' bigness as takes thy fancy," Blind John had once said.

"Dost tha take me fur siccan a fool as thysen?" Granny had responded.

John, however, had merely spoken for the sake of annoying the old woman. He himself had a great admiration for Quentin and Quentin's donations, so he protested hastily and truthfully "that he never thowt well o' Mr. Ralph—not he."

"Tha needna fear I'll tell on thee," replied Granny, disdainfully. "Tha says it to cross me. I know thee reet well. I con believe tha dunnot like Mr. Ralph, fur tha never gets owt from him, neither speech nor brass. An' tha likes Mr. Quentin three parts fur what tha gets an' th' remainder fur hissen—theer!"

Granny Darlow's regard was not in the slightest degree tinged with any mercenary feeling. She would have been equally devoted to Fleming had he never possessed a penny. What she admired was the young man's overflowing vitality, his good looks and sunny temper, his honourable simplicity of character. These last few days, during the general excitement caused by Ralph Fleming's mysterious death, Granny Darlow alone had made no comment whatever except that "theer wur a mort o' noise being made o'er a chap as wur better out o' the world than in it." For the rest, she went about with her mouth grimly shut,

giving no reply to the numerous indirect inquiries made about her absent grand-daughter, Rossela.

Now, meeting Quentin in the pale snowlit twilight on Wildersmoor, her black eyes encountered his dark grey ones with an inscrutable look in their depths, the look of one who sees the lifeboat disappearing in turmoil of wind and wave. It may return the same gallant boat; or it may return shattered, disabled; or —not at all.

"Cold for the New Year, Granny," said Fleming, lightly. "Here is something to buy a gown with," dropping a coin into the withered hand.

"Ay, to be sure, 'tis th' New Year to-morrow," with a little curtsey. "I wish thee good luck through it, Mr. Quentin, an' through every year after."

He nodded smiling, and passed on. Then a sudden recollection of the old woman's history shot through his mind, and an equally sudden feeling of comprehension. There were strange tales on Wildersmoor of Granny Darlow's youth, and Fleming, like everyone else, had heard them—but unheeding. Her life-story, true or false, had had no particular interest for him. Now, however, he recalled those whispered tales, and wondered if that grim drama had indeed been played, and if that withered old woman with the brilliant eyes were sister-spirit to her of Mycenæ. He turned and looked back. Granny Darlow was standing where he had left her, gazing after him. The discovery gave Quentin a slight shock. Why should she gaze at him thus earnestly? He did not remember her ever doing so before. But then he had never noticed. Was there some subtle change in him that was perceived by the swift intuition of the old woman? A moment later

he told himself this idea was but the reflex of the fantastic colouring that his thoughts had taken concerning her. Besides, what did it matter? What did anything matter now?

He walked on rapidly, careless whither he went, and the night closed round him—a still, glittering winter night; the grey-white earth beneath, the starry blue-black sky overhead. In the distance the lights of a farmhouse shone warmly. Fleming turned his back upon them, going in an opposite direction. After a while he stopped, turned again and struck into a path that led westward to the sea. A mile out of the little fishing village of North Rode stood an old farmhouse, a plantation of larches sheltering it from the north-east. It had been added to by Dr. Aveland, and was now a quaint comfortable residence. In front the garden sloped to the high road that skirted the beach, where the dim sea rolled up with its ceaseless thunder. A few yards from the gate Fleming stood still. There were lights in the windows, warm lights of home that shone through the drawn curtains into the eyes of the man outside and down into his heart. Just so had they shone four days ago, but then he had not lingered without as now. When anything cleaves a life in twain, sets a gulf between past and present, sense of time is lost. There is no time to us, and each day is as a thousand years. One counts one's life not by the dates in the almanack, but by one's own changes of thought and feeling. "When I thought that; when I felt thus;" these are the only dates, written on the human spirit like the changing characters on the demon sabres, the last writing permanent.

Therefore to Quentin those lights shone with a

strange familiarity, as though he had been long, long absent. He had not intended to come here to-night, yet he had come. He was not going in. By-and-by he would; not to-night. By-and-by, when the Avelands returned. They were going up to London to-morrow, to stay two months. Dr. Aveland had said so in a note of polite regret that he had sent to Quentin on hearing of Ralph Fleming's death. By-and-by he would go there again—as a friend. A question had come into Fleming's life, and he was prepared to solve it in the characteristically masculine fashion of running away. All men, even the best and noblest, believe that the gravest problems of life can be satisfactorily settled by flight of one kind or another. If a man fails in his business he cuts his throat; believing that he thereby makes things more comfortable for his penniless wife and children. If some unexpected obstacle arises to his union with the woman he loves, and he has already spoken to her of marriage, he will write her a letter of farewell, and run away. If he has not so spoken, he will congratulate himself that the solution of the question is thus rendered easier, and will run away in effect; letting his changed manner—and that only—tell her of his changed thought. It never occurs to him that she has as much interest in the matter as he, and has a right, at least, to know the reason of a change that affects her so vitally. Flight seldom settles any question: it still remains unanswered. But flight is easy; and the man who will unconcernedly face shot and shell sickness and death, turns coward before a moral difficulty, and runs away.

Therefore Quentin Fleming, being confronted with

a terrible knot in his thread of life, and having never perceived that, the Fates being women, their intricate weaving is best understood by a woman, determined, in masculine fashion to run away from the woman who could untie the knot for him, could answer the question which to him was unanswerable. Only four days since he had crossed that threshold with such high hopes and bounding pulses. Only four days since he had said to himself that the next time—the next time! Well, here was the next time. Southward over the roof glittered Orion. Vaguely as one thinks in dull pain, Fleming recalled some far-off dreadful fancy linked with the familiar constellation and fraught with new significance. Was there not in the great nebula of Orion the star-jewelled phantom of that grisly shape that "wore the likeness of a kingly crown?" A phantom that for Quentin had no terrors so long as he lived his life alone, but that stood between him and happiness. Invisible was that grim shape, hidden in the constellation that became its outward visible sign; so that Orion, lifting his starry splendour above the low roof of Sandhayes, his sword pointing downwards over Wildersmoor, stood as a warning angel barring the way lest that which was hidden should be revealed.

The stars in their courses move swiftly. Even as Quentin looked, the Hunter's noiseless stride took him higher—higher. Would those stars in their courses fight for or against him? Still Orion marched on, and the sea sang its song. The tide was high, the white foam glimmering in the starlight as it rushed over the shingle. How long he stood there Fleming never knew. At last he turned away. We always have to

turn away from everything, no matter what. There is never any pause save the briefest. Whether the path lies over thorns or on softest grass, we may not linger. If we creep into a thicket to give a moment's rest to our stiff and bleeding limbs, Time and Necessity, our task-masters, find us out, crack their whips in our ears, and we get up and stagger on. And, what is worse, we may not shelter others, not even help them. Our sufferings do not alleviate theirs. If we fall for very weariness we may not lie there and die. We must rise and be driven once more—driven —driven—till our feet touch the cool blessed shadowy waters of Death, and then the whip-cracking ceases—so far as we know.

CHAPTER V

THE fishing-village of North Rode possessed an ivy-clad church, a lych-gate, and a churchyard wherein the gravestones leant all ways and every way, as though the strong sea-winds had made the little plot of ground their chiefest wrestling-place. There was the Vicarage, a red-brick house with the date, 1710, cut on a small stone slab let in over the front door; the station, the solitary shop, which was also the post-office; and the smithy. The cottages of the fisher-folk ran for a short distance in two parallel lines from the church, thus forming the one street. Then, apparently becoming weary of monotony, they straggled aimlessly about, finally flinging themselves recklessly anywhere on beach and moor.

Sandhayes, where the Avelands lived, was about a mile from the village. It had once been a farm-house, the property of an energetic maiden lady who carried on the farm. She was a cousin of Mrs. Aveland, and so Frances spent most of her childhood here, her parents being glad that the child should have the pure air and free life impossible in London. When the old lady died, she left the farm to Frances. Mrs. Aveland had been dead many years, and Dr. Aveland resolved to leave town and spend on Wildersmoor what remained to him of life. His health had latterly failed seriously, the winters on that part of the coast are usually mild, and his old friend, Nicholas Fleming,

Quentin's father, lived only seven miles away at Wildersmoor Hall. Frances returned to the moor with delight; the place where one has spent one's childhood is generally the place one loves best. This was three years ago. During those three years Nicholas Fleming had died, and Quentin reigned at Wildersmoor. The Vicar of North Rode, too, had passed away—an old man—and his successor, the Rev. Cyril Paton, had married a friend of Frances Aveland.

This bright, frosty morning in February Mrs. Paton turned out of the village along the beach-road to Sandhayes. Despite the chill of the air, there was in it a faint suggestion as of a coming thaw. The rime-laden trees did not hold themselves so stiffly; the sandy ground had lost its iron ring; the frozen grass glistened wetly in the sunshine; a subtle change had passed even over the far-sparkling green of the sea —a film, a gossamer haze. But Nina Paton cared for none of these things. For her there was no beauty in those low sand-hills melting into the dusky expanse of Wildersmoor. It needed a different cast of mind to love that soft bare grey coast, full of tones of delicate yellow, and dusky brown, and deep dark emerald, and no brighter colour save at glow of sunset or sunburst after storm.

So Nina walked on, eyes and ears alike unheeding. From the village came sounds of homely human life. The ring of the blacksmith's hammer on the anvil, the clatter of clogs on the round stones of the village street, the shout of a fisherman to a comrade on the beach, the whistle of a train at North Rode station: sounds that grew fainter till only the murmur of the sea broke the stillness.

How desolate the moorlands looked, she thought, outstretched beneath the pale blue sky; a wide undulating plain of warm deep colouring, umbers, and siennas, and faded wallflower tints, with here and there a touch of orange, and here and there a touch of scarlet, where the sunshine caught a vivid frond of withered bracken or tattered bramble; and, over all, the glittering greyness of the melting rime. The red roof of Sandhayes nestled cosily enough by the protecting larch wood, the trees forming a rampart to north and east, but leaving the old farm-house open to west and south—to sun and sea. It was a low irregular building, with a big old-fashioned porch and a wide path from door to gate, on either side of which stood a closely-clipped yew, that on the right being trimmed into the shape of a gigantic teapot, that on the left into a fair-sized boat. Perhaps the original clipper, inspired by the neighbouring village, wished to symbolize the fisherman's life at home and abroad. Be as that may, the oldest man in North Rode could not recall the time when "boart an' teapot" had not stood at the gate of Sandhayes. And they were likely to remain, for Frances Aveland greatly delighted in them. What she liked her father also liked, and so all things were at peace.

Mrs. Paton's face assumed a more cheerful expression as her eyes rested on Sandhayes. They were pretty eyes, of a soft grey-blue, and the face was pretty, too; the features irregular, but the colouring bright; and the fair curls that clustered thickly beneath her hat—and, indeed, all over her head, for Nina Paton wore her hair short—were no dull flaxen tint, but shining yellow. Yet more smiling became

the grey-blue eyes when a small terrier bounded out of the white gate, and, recognizing a friend, rushed towards her with effusive welcome. Following the dog came a girl of stately beauty and slow grace of movement; black-haired, with straight black brows over eyes that were not black nor brown, as might have been expected, but grey—the grey of clear lake-water before dawn; eyes that might have been those of a Nixe, that suggested some far northern ancestry. Signy's soul might have looked out upon the world through just such grey windows. The face was a delicate oval, the mouth and chin firmly modelled, the complexion almond-white, with carnations, the head nobly poised. Small wonder that Quentin Fleming saw that face ever before him; drawing him across Wildersmoor early and late, in storm and shine; unconsciously urging him to sacrifice himself, lest the threatening shadow ahead should darken life for her; now, when that shadow seemed to his calmer mind less distinct, raising his hopes once more, drawing him again to Sandhayes over those seven wild miles.

The Avelands had been in London for nearly two months; a time of dolour for Nina Paton, who was as a lost soul in the absence of her friend.

"Oh, it is good to have you back again, Frances!" she said, fervently. "Six weeks and more of solid parish, without the relief of your society, is rather much. Observe my haste to welcome you home."

"I do observe it, and am grateful. I also was coming to you."

"But not so quickly. Who is it that says the feet of Love are never so swift as those of Hate? Your affection for me does not waft you to North Rode

with the celerity that my rage with parochial trivialities wafts me to Sandhayes."

Frances laughed softly.

"It may be so. Certainly people do not take so much trouble to make their friends happy as they do to make their enemies uncomfortable. Yet if you wanted me, Nina, I think I should not be long on the way."

"I know you would not. There is a ferocious integrity about you that would compel you to come to and stand by a friend to the uttermost, so long as that friend demanded it of you, even if the said friend did not amuse you. That," continued Mrs. Paton, reflectively, "I consider the highest point of human virtue—to exert yourself on behalf of a person who does not amuse you."

"Is it the parish that does not amuse you just now? or is it Mr. Paton?"

"Oh, I am not so unreasonable as to expect amusement from a man who has undertaken to spend his life in setting an example to others. As for the parish, did I not say it was solid—too solid? With you, and your father, and Quentin Fleming, all away, I have almost ceased to be human. Is not laughter the distinguishing characteristic of humanity?"

"Why did you not send for Dr. McKie?"

"I would have done so, but he and Cyril always fight. The Prayer Book versus the Shorter Catechism. Esmé Rusholme came over several times—not to see me. Twice we went to the palace. Once the Bishop came to us. We have been to three dinners and a concert. I don't know which was the worst."

"Who were at the dinners? The usual people, I suppose?"

"Yes—the usual marionettes. I should much prefer dining with ghosts. It would be less ruffling to one's natural vanity to sit at meat with spirits without bodies, than with bodies without spirits."

"Surely there were one or two spirits?"

"None. Really there was no one in the least entertaining."

"Not the Bishop? I am always entertained by the Bishop. His agility in dodging conversational spears, and his skill in ruling men of differing religious views, incline me to think that he himself has no religion at all. Gallio is my ideal ruler, and Gallio cared for none of these things."

"Gallio was a sort of British Resident, or Chief Commissioner, wasn't he? My Biblical memory is not so good as it ought to be, but I recollect the Romans came out rather well, on the whole. But why your ideal ruler, when your own religious opinions are not very far removed from Dr. McKie's severities?"

"I do not consider Gallio irreligious; and whether he was or not one must needs admire capacity. He had a just discernment of the proportionate value of things. He impresses me as a strong man—one not to be moved by popular clamour."

"You are exactly like your father Frances."

"Probably. I have noticed that most women are either very like or very unlike their fathers. But where are we going, Nina?"

"Going?" repeated Mrs. Paton, vaguely, looking round on the wide moor. They had turned into one of the narrow tracks crossing it from west to east.

"I am sure I do not know where we are going. Will this path lead to the Moss Farm?"

"Certainly. It passes the gate."

"That will do. I have to take a parcel there for Cyril, a pastoral parcel, you understand, and I hoped you would come with me. The moor is so creepy, and Ralph Fleming's murder makes it worse than ever—more ghostly, I mean. People have talked about nothing else ever since."

"The moor is usually so safe that such a thing happening upon it naturally excites the whole country. Then, too, the Flemings being so well known makes the interest greater. And the circumstances were very strange," concluded Frances, thoughtfully.

"There speaks that ferocious integrity I have noticed in you. It will not suffer you to express regret for such a worthless fellow as Ralph Fleming."

"When I spoke I was not thinking especially of Ralph Fleming, but of the manner of his death. Still, you are so far right that I cannot see why a lot of untruthful sentiment should be expressed immediately such a man is dead. If there is nothing good to be said, then say nothing at all. One can always keep silence."

"Can one? I daresay it is easy to you because you have chiefly lived here, and Wildersmoor seems to be perpetually laying an invisible finger on one's lips. Never was there a better background for queer misty horrors—like this murder, for instance. There was nothing particularly horrid in the manner of it, the strangeness lies in the sequel: the blind man guiding the murderer through the fog, then finding the body.

All that could have happened nowhere else save in this wild desolation, among these grim people with their noisy clogs. As you are not a native I permit myself these observations," added Nina, apologetically.

Frances laughed. She was used to these outbursts of Nina Paton's.

"If you had lived on Wildersmoor as a child you would not feel the place desolate, nor the people grim, and the clang of the wooden shoon would be as pleasant to your ears as the swish of the rain."

"It is," assented Nina, drily. "I detest both."

"The people," Frances continued, "are like tiger-moths—silent, with black wings. Presently the black wings lift and you see other wings underneath—the colour of flame."

"It may be so. Perhaps I have not tried to see the under wings. Perhaps they are never shown to the Vicar's wife, whose mental horizon is bounded on three sides by the parish and on the fourth by heaven."

"Your horizon, Nina, seems to me considerably wider than your description of it."

"Perhaps it has six sides, the extra two being the World and the Bottomless Pit; to which latter Cyril would assuredly believe me bound if he could hear me."

"Does he not hear you?"

"Never. Is it likely? Am I not married to him? Is it not always the man one marries who knows least about one? A husband is not a friend."

"Oh," said Frances, tentatively.

"No, he is not," persisted Nina. "That is a delusion of the unmarried. Everyone has two sides, a pretty side and an ugly one. You only exhibit your

pretty side to your husband; your friend sees both. That is the difference. Cyril thinks me a well-intentioned amiable woman, fairly sensible, and anxious to do her best. You know me as a biting, scratching, inquisitive, and discontented animal, and what a comfort that is! You may laugh, but it is true. One must sometimes appear without one's powder and curling-irons. Therein lies the blessedness of friendship. Ugliness, whether moral or physical, does not drive away a friend. Nothing drives away a friend but treachery."

"I see your meaning. Peter is pitied and pardoned; Judas goes to his own place."

"Precisely. And serve him right," said Mrs. Paton, with energy.

"Yet I perceive no reason why marriage should not be the highest friendship."

"Neither do I, except the eternal reason that is always confounding all other reasons—because it isn't so. How did we arrive at this discussion, Frances?"

"It branched off from the Bishop's dinners, I think. Or the concert. I really forget. Do not all roads lead to Rome? All conversation, if long enough continued, ends either in marriage or death."

Mrs. Paton reflected.

"I do not see how you make that out."

"Well, I will put it another way. All conversation, if given time, ends in scandal or religion."

"I believe it does!" cried Nina, with a burst of laughter. "And I never noticed that. You solemn people are the observant ones."

"Am I solemn? Anyway, I am right in this. Whether the speakers are men or women, or men and

women, makes no difference. Sooner or later they will drift towards one or the other of these topics. It is natural. Marriage and death are the two serious facts of life, and people's thoughts circle round them."

"I suppose so," gloomily. "They might be called the twin shadows of life. They loom ahead from one's earliest childhood. 'You must marry—you must die.' To every fatherless woman the formula is slightly altered, 'You must marry or die.' Civilization and savagery alike say—'marry or starve.' Society and relatives alike cry—'live with a man or be pushed into a corner and drudge.' There are a few women who do neither of these things; only a few, and they are wealthy. Therefore for them the position is reversed."

"The world is changing," said Frances.

"It is. But it has not yet changed enough to give us freedom. If I had had twopence a year of my own I would have put on trews and tramped the earth. To wander—that had always a fascination for me. To get out of the dreadful rut of ordinary life, to be rid of the ridiculous clockwork of regular meals and weekly washing, and the awful weariness of one's clothes and one's servants. A man, even though he be the biggest fool upon earth, can follow his natural bent. A woman cannot, as yet. As I did not care to drudge I married, and in that I have done well. Cyril is a good man, and I am teaching myself to forget how 'life runs large on the Long Trail.' I hope I make him a good wife. I am not so unreasonable as to bully him because circumstances married me to him. I look after his house well, see that he has good dinners, agree with him when I can and often pretend to when I cannot. What more could man desire?

The combined housekeeper and echo has been the masculine ideal for centuries. Every man likes his wife to be the boy who follows the quack, beating a drum and crying—'My master is the wisest man in the world!' People were better off in the old days. They had pilgrimages for their safety valves. When utter *boredom* seized them they could leave house, husband, children, and wander away with a party of strangers to our Lady of This or That, returning home healed and restored."

"There are modern pilgrimages, and they are called Cook's Tours," remarked Frances.

"Ah, not the same thing. A Cook's tourist goes about with a telegraph-wire hitched to her belt, and public opinion waiting for her at home, seeking whom it may devour. Just now I am feeling life a burden. Suppose I suddenly took ship for Jaffa? What would happen? No sooner do I arrive than a telegram finds me—'Come home. Clothing Club wants you.' When I obey the summons, people do not flock to venerate me and hear my adventures, but criticise my forsaking my duties. And rightly, too, for that matter. One must be free to be a pilgrim now-a-days."

"You mean that you recognize your responsibilities, but object that you were in a measure compelled to assume them. Is that it?"

"That is it precisely. I desired a celibate life and was not free to choose it. Could I have followed my natural bent, I should have been content. However, I am conscientiously trying to imitate the Indian devotees who hold up an arm till it stiffens. Their religious ideas command it; and so do mine. It is my duty to stiffen my mind; to swathe it with gowns, and

servants, and society aims. Perhaps when Cyril is an aged Bishop, and I an aged Bishopess, I may be permitted a little wandering if I still care for it. Probably I shall not. No doubt by that time I shall regard a big dinner as of far greater importance than the ruins of Baalbec."

Frances Aveland looked a moment at her friend, then turned her gaze over the moorland; where southward the Pike, clad in pale mist like a Viking in his grey wolfskins, towered over the wide land, keeping watch and guard.

In her mind rose the bitter words of a great writer of another land—a northern land wherein may be found a singular affinity of thought to that on Wildersmoor:—

"But all things die, even our memories; and our good and noble feelings die also, and in their place comes reason."

And when that age of reason sets in; when the eyes at last turn away from the Vision of the Delectable Mountains to the very tangible and ever-ready muckrake, great is the rejoicing among the affectionate relatives of the reasonable one—for of such is the Kingdom of Hell. Would Nina settle finally into the swathed mummy, the capable fashionable housewife? Her varying moods, her restlessness that—like the ferment in the wine—tended to better things, all vanished utterly; together with the light mocking gaiety, the quick sympathy and generous admiration of others that made up the personality of Nina Paton? There is no angel more beneficent, no spectre more terrible, than change.

CHAPTER VI

WITH these thoughts rising like the moorland mists, Frances once more looked at her friend.

"I do not think that fate will overtake you, Nina. It need not. Seriously, what would do you good just now?"

"That was Macbeth's question, and there is no answer to it. If a square man is put into a round hole he naturally wriggles till his angles are rubbed off. By-and-by my angles will be rubbed off. Then I shall no longer wriggle. Already I find amusement in my social plotting. I hope to see Cyril a Bishop, though he is rather too much in earnest to succeed in these days. I must cool him down a little."

"Do you think the cooling likely to be beneficial —or right?"

"Oh, my dear!—to succeed one must not consider what is right or wrong, but only what is expedient. There are only two classes of men who can afford to be highminded—the millionaire and the beggar. I was very highminded when I was a beggar."

"I have not perceived any difference in you, Nina."

"That observation cuts both ways. Do you mean that I was never high-minded? Or that I still appear so? Any way, I admire high-mindedness in others, which ought to be accounted to me for righteousness. Now, I have finished my grumbling for the present. Thanks for listening to it all. You are a firstrate

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listener, Frances, and, what is still better, you never remind one of anything one has said. There is something peculiarly infuriating in having one's remarks hurled at one ages after they have been uttered and forgotten. Nobody is consistent save the bores. For instance, Esmé Rusholme is a perfectly consistent creature, and what a bore!"

"I dislike her myself, but I am sorry for her just now. There was a rumour that she would marry Ralph Fleming, and if that was true, his death is a great disappointment."

"Again, dear, I congratulate you on felicity of expression. 'A disappointment.' Precisely. And no more."

"Perhaps I ought not to have said that. I will say, a great trouble. But it was really so difficult to imagine Ralph Fleming inspiring any affection that one insensibly regarded him as a man who would be married chiefly for his belongings. And I believe she would have managed him better than anyone else I can think of."

"Yes, she would," assented Mrs. Paton. "She is the sort of woman who would manage any man. Nobody could stir her one inch. Heaven and earth combined could not do it. There is not one spark of generosity in her."

"What has she been doing to ruffle you so, Nina?"

"Trying to make friends with me," aggrievedly.

"Perhaps she may be relenting towards Travis Crosier, and therefore seeks your society."

Travis Crosier was the North Rode curate.

"No," said Nina, decisively, "it is not Travis Crosier, though I intend her to marry him if I can

possibly compass it. No, poor dear devoted Travis is not the reason of Esmé's coming to teach in our Sunday School. The reason is simply Quentin Fleming. Esmé means to marry a rich man, and Ralph was ready to hand. Now he is gone, but his cousin remains. Esmé does not waste time in useless lamenting."

Nina shot a side glance at her companion as she said this. She wished to observe what effect it would have. A flash of colour came and went on Frances Aveland's face as suddenly as the Northern Lights. She said nothing, and Nina continued:

"It is perfectly absurd, of course. But Esmé Rusholme is one of those people who are not capable of seeing absurdity in anything that they do themselves." Here Nina added in her own mind, "and for that very reason they often succeed." Then aloud:

"It bores me dreadfully to have her perpetually dropping in on Sundays; though she has not been here for the last fortnight. Tired, I suppose, as Mr. Fleming did not appear. We have not seen him in the school since Christmas. You know how he often used to help us with the boys on Sunday afternoons."

Frances did know. Quentin used to walk over from the Hall after lunch, rejoice the Vicar's soul by appearing in the schoolroom, and reducing the most unruly boys to quiet behaviour; and then by way of rewarding himself would finish the day by dining with the Avelands at Sandhayes. Neither Frances nor her father undertook instruction of youth. They were of that select company who decline to concern themselves with occupations for which nature has not fitted them.

"Are you short of teachers, Nina? because," smiling serenely, "I am afraid you will never get any help from Sandhayes."

"I am truly thankful we do not. Think how terrible it would be if we all talked 'shop' on Sunday evenings, which we should inevitably do if you and Dr. Aveland spent Sunday afternoons in the schoolroom. As things are now, your house gives us a fresh atmosphere. We are in no need of teachers. There are always Cyril, and myself, and Travis Crosier, and I daresay Mr. Fleming will help us again. Esmé is simply a disturbing element. She teaches well, there is no denying that; but she exasperates me. I dislike the type of girl, smooth-faced and treacherous, and, oh! so lucky—always so lucky! I wish you would help me to marry her to Travis Crosier."

Mrs. Paton spoke with intention. She could not perceive the delicate tones in the dusky northern landscape, nor the subtle harmonies in the hearts of its people; but she could see—and clearly—the drift of human lives, and the present state of affairs between Sandhayes and the Hall appealed both to her sympathies and her self-interest. If Frances Aveland married Quentin Fleming, his influence would give Cyril Paton an upward lift. The Vicar of North Rode had usually been lucky in getting preferment, and Nina had no mind to spend her life in parish work and obscurity. Also, she was sincerely attached to her friend, and Quentin Fleming was really the very nicest fellow, and such a good match.

Perhaps marrying an old playmate is a somewhat matter of fact proceeding, but Nina hoped Frances would not look at it in this light. Quentin was such

an exceptional old playmate, the marriage would be so suitable, and so useful. A little while ago everything seemed to be going smoothly. Now here was Esmé, scheming, cautious, determined. Mrs. Paton knew well how often men have been induced to marry one woman even while preferring another. "She will flatter him," thought Nina. "She will be always on the spot. She will more than hint she adores him, and then he will marry her out of compassion, and because he does not know whether Frances cares or not. How tiresome it all is! How I wish I could induce her to take a reasonable everyday view of things and do a little scheming on her own account. But she never will. She will give a rival every possible chance from sheer pride." And Nina fell into gloomy reverie, picturing the future in colours as sombre as Woffendale. Dr. Aveland dead, Frances gone—for it seemed hardly probable that she would remain at Sandhayes after her father's death; Esmé reigning at the Hall and studiously ignoring North Rode; Quentin Fleming grown morose—Nina felt sure he would grow morose if he married the wrong woman. What a prospect for herself, Nina! Her friend's voice broke in upon these melancholy forebodings.

"Do not look so wretched, dear. Such an expression of countenance would best befit the unhappy man on whom you propose to confer such a doubtful benefit as Esmé Rusholme."

"You are mistaken. Mr. Crosier would be perfectly happy with her, and she would make him an excellent wife. The only way to render an obnoxious woman harmless is to marry her to a man who will neither sink nor rise. Sinking would exasperate her;

rising would give her too much power. Reasonable comfort is the great paralyzer. She does not like either you or me, and that sort of person is apt to cause annoyance in a country place, therefore, I shall help Travis Crosier all I can. By-and-by he will get a living, and away they will go."

Frances Aveland's black brows went up into her hair.

"Is it worth while, Nina?"

"I think so. To me it is. I know what you mean. You do not care for these counter moves. You take no heed of an enemy, if you have one. You walk on serenely through the scrimmage of life. If you were hit you would walk on just the same. Now, I see the attack coming, and do my best to avert it. Failing that, I hit back."

"But it does not appear to me that there is any attack to speak of."

"Not to speak of, perhaps," replied Mrs. Paton, slowly. Then, after a pause, she asked, "Do you ever think of the future, Frances?"

"Very often, and to very little purpose. How can one say one will do this or that or the other? Of all things one's own life is least under one's own control, because it so depends upon the lives of others."

"Not more than their lives depend upon us. For instance, you, Frances, influence other lives more than they do yours. There is Jack Ulyett. He was solidly in love with you. So much so that it made him clear-sighted enough to perceive what a miserable idiot he was, and gave him strength to keep his useless feelings to himself. I do not care for scamps, as a rule.

They are hopelessly out of date—like the smart highway men our great-great-grand-mothers used to admire. But there was really something attractive about that man, and the way in which he haunted our house merely to hear me talk of you was quite pathetic. There is a proof that you influence others more than they do you, for you never gave a thought to that poor fellow."

"Oh, I liked Mr. Ulyett. He used to come with Quentin and talk to father. He had quite a gift that way."

"For talking to your father? I daresay. Poor Jack always struck me as being a loyal soul, and he and Quentin Fleming seemed to be good friends."

Here Nina congratulated herself on having arrived at another significant point in the conversation. In vain. It did not bring the confidence she hoped for. Frances merely asked, with a flash of amusement in her eyes:

"What do you expect me to say?"

"Nothing! Nothing!" cried the other, hastily. "But I think you are tolerably certain to marry sooner or later, and I do hope you will marry well and happily in every sense of both words; for then you will be a shining light, you will do good unconsciously in all sorts of ways. Most married women are detestable. You will not be. You seem to me the ideal matron —woman's ideal matron, not man's. It is only natural that I should hope you may have plenty of soft cushions between you and the world, and nothing particular ever happening to you. It is so much better not to have anything particular happening in one's life, and,

somehow, you impress me as a woman who might have tragic happenings: a sort of captive Andromache, you know."

"I like to hear you singing the praises of a placid life, Nina, you whose soul is akin to a comet and would enjoy an equally erratic orbit."

"I am different," said Mrs. Paton, in tones of conviction. "Wherever I went, nothing particular would happen to me. My existence could not be dramatic. It was never intended to be dramatic. Fate would pass me over as a mouse too small to be worth catching—a soubrette on life's stage. But there are people who should be kept out of the turmoil, if possible. They seem to attract difficulties as a magnet draws iron filings."

"Are you not a trifle contradictory? If an individual is destined to trouble, assuredly he or she will not escape it. One must dree one's weird as best one may. Again, if a sheltered life has the deteriorating effect ascribed to it, surely it is better to live unsheltered. For what can it profit man or woman to gain the whole world and lose their own soul?"

Nina looked at her friend's face; beautiful, smiling, half-jesting, wholly earnest, with its delicate contours and lovely bloom; the clear grey eyes contrasting so singularly with their black lashes and the black brows above them, and the crown of silky black hair. Nina looked and appreciated all that she saw, for a woman is no mean judge of another woman's beauty.

"You mistake me," she replied, gravely. "Did I say a troubled life was good? I did not mean it. Nothing evil is good, and trouble is evil. People whose own lives are comfortable always talk as though

adversity were a magic crucible; you throw in base metal and it comes out gold. Nothing of the sort. The base metal remains base metal. The men and women who have passed through that crucible and come out gold were gold before they fell in. The furnace is just so much wear and tear. That is all."

"Ah, that is not so certain. The gold may have been obscured by much dross before it arrived at the crucible. Perhaps evil has its uses. Perhaps, by its clashing with good it helps to develop such fine characters out of the chaos, as the unrest of the sea keeps it sweet."

Mrs. Paton shook her head.

"How about the drowned and the maimed? No —no, you will never persuade me to 'beckit to the deil' in that fashion. That is the way people justify all kinds of iniquity, by saying it is wholesome for somebody or other. They seem to suppose that sort of argument ends the matter. Nobody inquires whether it is wholesome for the victims. They have no rights. But I am like Sydney Smith, I always want to hear the lion's version of the story. Therefore, Frances, I hope you will have a life free from evil and trouble. How I wish you would choose someone near," this was the nearest approach Nina dared make to the name of Quentin Fleming. "Of course, it is all pure selfishness on my part. What would become of me if I were left alone at North Rode? Do think of what I say though I have no right to say it. Don't waste your life either in feeding the pigs at Sandhayes, or in throwing it away on someone unworthy."

"Most people are wasted," said Frances.

"They are," gloomily, "when there is anything in

them. Was not Greek statuary burnt to make lime? But that is no reason why you should be wasted."

"And as for the poor pigs," Frances continued, a laugh in her voice, "why should you scorn our dear little Berkshires? We take pride in our black pigs."

"Well, I think you and your father the most delightful creatures upon earth, but when it comes to 'love me—love my pig,' I cry off. My sympathies are not Catholic enough to include the Berkshires. Here is the farm. Will you come in with me?"

"If you wish, though I think you will bestow your pastoral benediction better without me."

"Perhaps," Nina assented. "I might be less embarrassed. Besides, my personality is more impressive when you are not by. I hardly like to ask you to wait for me, but I shall not be more than ten minutes."

"Of course I will wait. I will walk up and down here and watch Malise chase the festive rabbit."

"Thank you. I will be less than ten minutes."

Mrs. Paton walked up the straggling path leading to the farm-house, backed by its barns and outbuildings. Behind it, northward, the ground rose slightly, and here were cultivated fields; some brown and bare, waiting for the sower; some green meadowland. There was a fluttering of fowls, a whirl of pigeons, a barking of dogs, this last vigorously echoed by Malise; but of these sounds Nina heard none. She was busy pondering her own wisdom in discussing the future with Frances Aveland.

"I wonder," she thought, "if I have done right in speaking? Probably not. In these matters one is always wrong. Why must one always meddle with one's friends' marriages? Perhaps I had better have

urged her not to marry Quentin Fleming. Then the perversity of human nature would have fixed her mind firmly upon him. Most likely she will snub him now, and he will have to go on all fours to soften her. And suppose he doesn't! I wish I had said nothing about Esmé. However, I will marry her to Travis Crosier, that I am determined to do. I wonder if there is anybody about here who has a distant living in his gift. I have a great mind to——" Here the heavy farmhouse door was opened by a buxom woman, comely and smiling, with the fresh colour characteristic of the natives of that mild damp coast; and Mrs. Paton's thoughts turned into a ministering channel.

CHAPTER VII

LEFT alone, Frances paced slowly to and fro at a little distance from the farm gate; now and then reproving the terrier, who with one eye on his mistress, made dashes at the rabbits that were cheerfully scurrying about—cheerfully, because on Wildersmoor the rabbits were fed in severe weather, not left to starve as is the usual practice.

From the farm came sounds of human life, but sound does not travel well on this part of the west coast, so that these were scarcely audible where Frances walked. Instead, the sounds of the moor made themselves heard. The approaching thaw was already releasing the earth. Here and there a handful of frozen snow slipped from willow and bramble, and fell with a soft pad like a leopard's footfall. Faint airs from the sea stirred in the withered fern, and it rustled eerily, as though the dead Legions were marching over it once more to meet the Briton on his own camping-ground. The frozen pools showed surface glistening in the chill sunshine, and birds twittered in joyful anticipation. There was much bird life on the moor. To those clear sea-grey eyes of Frances Aveland there was much of all beauty on Wildersmoor, quite apart from the fact that Wildersmoor Hall stood upon its farthest verge. But certainly Quentin Fleming added interest to those miles of heather, and bog, and peat. He was a point of thought in the far dis-

tance. She could not look towards the Pike without being reminded of him and his goings to and fro. For Quentin came and went continually between the Hall and Sandhayes, walking or riding over at any hour, and—like a true Lancashire man—in any weather. Did the familiar rain fall in a persistent drizzle, or did an Atlantic gale sweep wet-winged over the sand-hills and across the moor, then it was tolerably certain that as twilight deepened a gust of rain and wind would, as it were, blow Fleming into the hall at Sandhayes; laughing, shaking the water-drops off his great-coat, bringing in with him the breath of the strong sea-wind that sang without in the night.

This abounding vitality, born of the outdoor life lived by himself and his fathers, and accompanied—as it often is—by an honourable simplicity of character, made Quentin's a very attractive personality. There is a sense of rest—of exhilaration, in meeting one who has dwelt near enough to Mother Nature to have drunk of the wine of her joyous steadfastness. Therefore the master of Wildersmoor was welcome at Sandhayes. Just now, however, there was a shadow on Frances Aveland's face as her glance fell on the grey hill that marked Quentin's home. Attached though she was to Nina, she yet wished that some subjects—Fleming being one—might be left to silence. Nina meant well, excellently well; and the result was the usual result of meaning well. Frances turned her eyes westward, where no misty hill rose above the horizon; only the grey level line of the sea ended the wide stretch of undulating moor. There was the dark larch wood behind Sandhayes, hiding the homestead from sight, and further to the right, the village and the square

tower of the church. The girl's gaze dwelt on these lovingly—half-unconsciously, while her mind recalled Nina's attempts at advice. Over Esmé, Frances compelled her thoughts to pass lightly. Nina always had theories of what this or that person intended. In any case, pride forbade Frances either to acknowledge a rival or to take any steps to defeat her.

The incessant social plotting by which so many men and women gain the prizes of this world, was impossible to this girl reared between moor and sea. It is true that numberless human creatures are reared under very similar conditions, who are no more influenced by the earth and sky around them than if they had been bred in one of the gigantic dustbins that men call cities.

But Frances was of a silent reflective nature, and the spirit of Wildersmoor sank deeply into her mind as the peat tinges the burn. And the very spirit of that strip of grey north-west coast is an absence of littleness. In that the moor is like Death. For after wandering on it awhile, one's thoughts of one's friends and acquaintances insensibly change. Their images come before the mental vision as those of beings very far removed; having sloughed away their earthly garments of error, of senseless brutal strivings; appearing only in very pitiful guise, as penitent spirits needing pardon. On Wildersmoor there may be tragedies, there cannot be trivialities; the sombre genius of the place forbids them. One may see the pillar of fire in the wilderness; for piping and dancing one needs the market-place. Therefore, as Frances Aveland looked on the familiar moorland, her slight resentment melted away, melted into bird voices and coming of

spring, as the snow was dissolving in the warmer air. Nina Paton was a loyal friend; sometimes even the most loyal friends make mistakes when they try, in all good faith, to order our lives. Their mistakes may be forgotten when the loyalty is so steadfast. For Esmé Rusholme—Frances had never liked Esmé. When one is conscious of insuperable antagonism towards an individual, it is wisdom to avoid that individual; to walk—if you both can—on parallel paths of life. For if those paths converge the result will be collision, and unfortunately the coarser nature generally gets the best of it. Frances had instinctively tried to walk parallel with Esmé; had also tried to ignore the warning of her own intuitions. Now she set herself a further task: to forget Nina's opinions, to forget the question presented to her by Mrs. Paton. If Esmé chose to come often to North Rode, it was not for Frances to analyze her reasons—still less to take any action in consequence. There is a certain degradation in being dragged into the whirlpool of petty scheming that exists in every town, big or little. From this Aveland's daughter turned resolutely away; perhaps with the greater ease because an inward voice whispered that whatever thoughts might dwell in Esmé Rusholme's mind they were not likely to find an echo in Quentin Fleming's.

The moments drifted by unheeded. It is only man who makes time—like all else—a worry and a burden, and doles it out threateningly by minutes. Away from humanity there is always plenty of time. On Wildersmoor one was only conscious of Nature's gracious divisions of morning, noon, and night, each melting imperceptibly into the other; not marked by infuriat-

ing ticking and clangour of the pit, but by gradual changes of light and soothing voices of earth and sea: for, say the old philosophers, the pulse of the world is sleep; the rhythm of the world as the sphere swings onward in its orbit, is sleep; and thus comes the healing gift of open-air solitude: it is the rocking of the cradle, the lullaby of the ancient Nurse.

Presently a figure appeared in the distance, seaward; a woman, bent, and carrying a basket: Granny Darlow, surely. She sometimes came to gather cockles on North Rode beach when a friendly farmer gave her a lift in his cart thither. As Frances watched the old woman moving slowly along, the click of the farm gate announced Mrs. Paton's return.

"Have I been long?" she asked. "I am ashamed that you should wait for me, but I am grateful. Who is that old creature? I have seen her two or three times about here."

"That is Granny Darlow. She lives near the Hall, next door to Blind John. I daresay she has been cockle-gathering. Now she will walk home, seven miles."

And Frances drew out her purse.

"Are you going to bestow a trifle on her to make her walk easier? I would give her something, too, but I have not my purse with me. Never expected to want it in these wilds."

"This will do. It is such a satisfaction to me that Granny never wears a bonnet. If she did, I should experience a shock. A bonnet is prosaic and amenable to ordinary laws, whereas Granny is neither prosaic nor amenable. I rejoice to see that she has sufficient sense of the fitness of things to cover her head

with the hood of that blue cloak. It is a picturesque garment. Do you not think so, Nina?"

Mrs. Paton eyed the bent old figure, now quite near.

"Decidedly witch-like. Does she come to church in that hooded cloak? I do not remember to have seen her there."

People with flexible brows have usually a sense of humour, and the brows express it. Just now Frances Aveland's brows expressed a good deal.

"I am afraid, dear, that Granny Darlow's religious views are fashioned like the gargoyles—to remain outside."

"Are Granny's views so startling? I should like——"

Nina checked herself. They were close to the old woman, who calmly surveyed them, her keen black eyes resting longest on Frances. She took the gift of money with thanks, and observed that she had inquired in the village after Dr. Aveland's health.

"My father is rather better," said Frances.

"Ay, so I heerd. That's as it should be."

Then Nina spoke.

"You Wildersmoor people are very weather-wise. There seems to be a wind rising. Shall we have rain, do you think?"

Granny looked, not at the sky and the distant sea, but at the speaker.

"I mind thy face right well," she said; "thou art th' parson's wife. Earth weather's nowt to worrit o'er. It's th' weather o' folks lives as matters. I've known toimes when I couldna ha' told whether it wur storm or shine, night or day. But tha'll never know toimes like those." A slight smile flickered over the

wrinkled visage. "Never," she repeated, emphatically; "tha'll allus be able to tell whether it's wet or dry, hot or cold."

"Have you had much trouble in your life? Would you like Mr. Paton to call on you?"

Nina spoke partly from a sense of duty, wifely and clerical; partly because it was politic to conciliate everyone, high or low; partly, also, from real interest in this bent old crone with those strange bright eyes gleaming under the withered brow with its crown of thick white hair. Yet, as Nina uttered the words, she felt an intuitive sense of incongruity, and Granny's black eyes met hers with a subtle derision in their depths.

"Th' parson?" she said, and the subtle derision of her glance was echoed in her voice. "I reckon I could teach him summat, if so be as he'd th' sense to learn. What con men-folk teach women, I'd loike to know? An' what ha' men-folk to do wi' women's troubles, barrin' th' making on 'em? That's th' men's job, th' tangling o' th' skein fur th' woman to unravel. Never a mon has th' wit nor patience to undo it hissen; he just casts it down, an' runs away. Then parson cooms an' tells th' woman it's a' her doing. That's the men! —I know 'em."

She paused, leaning both hands on her stick. Mrs. Paton, taken aback, glanced at Frances for assistance, and, receiving none, said, rather vaguely:

"I thought, perhaps, you needed consolation."

"Nay, I dunnot. Tha means well, but what dost thou think I want consoling fur? Nowt, barrin' owd age, an' theer's no consoling fur that. Eh, if I'd my toime to coom o'er again, I'd make th' most on it—

ay, I would! Fur th' best on it soon goes, an' you conna tell what's to coom after, fur a' parsons say. Happen it'll be better nor one thinks, happen it willna; but, better or no, it conna be better than th' best o' this life here. An' so I say to a' lasses, make th' most on it."

"I do not know what my husband would say to that."

"I know reet well what he'd say," responded Granny, calmly. "Parsons allus make out as folk are a' cut out o' th' same piece o' cloth, an' a' th' same pattern. You mun think this, an' you mun think that, an' you munnot feel owt. An' if you tell 'em th' Lord made a sight o' difference btwixt th' sea an' yon pond, they say it's a' water, an' th' one mout be as quoiet as th' other if it loiked. That's parsons, that is! Ay, an' most other folk, too. I hannot patience wi' em."

Light clouds were drifting up from the west, though the sun still shone from a wide rift of blue, catching the old woman's worn wedding-ring as her withered hands clasped the knob of the stick on which she leant.

"I suppose," said Nina, as the glitter of the gold caught her eye, "that you have been a widow many years?"

A brighter glitter came into the keen old eyes.

"Nay. It wur fur a blue-eyed mon o' Wildersmoor that I turned o'er a fisher-lad as had never a thowt but fur me. An' I had never a thowt but fur th' other. That's mostly th' way o' things. An' afore I'd wedded him a year I wur thinkin' o' making a brew o' th moss-plants as would ha' rid me of him safe enow. I dunnot know as I wouldna ha' done it too if he hadna gone off and never troubled me

more. I dunnot know wheer he went to. I never heard."

"And the fisherman?"

Granny Darlow shut her mouth tightly.

"Nay, that's neither here nor theer."

She turned with a swift bird-like movement to Frances, who had been a silent observant listener.

"Lass, I wish thee good luck in life, but wishes dunnot allus make it coom. See here, if ever owt troubles thee, if ever theer's a tangle as tha conna undo, tha con either fetch me or coom to me—which ever tha likes—an' I'll fettle it. I'm nigh on eighty, but theer's many a year o' life in me yet. When tha wants me I'll be theer."

Granny was old and poor, white-haired, bent, and shrivelled; all the vitality in her seeming concentrated in the glittering black eyes. Yet her words conveyed a sense of power, of capacity to carry out that which she professed. One felt that if she could not openly slay her Philistines, she would certainly contrive to pull the roof about their ears, even at the risk of involving herself in the common ruin. She inspired belief in her steadfastness; equally responsive, to the utmost of her capacity, to a demand made now or ten years hence.

Nina drew back a little; Granny's dæmonic influence disturbed her. There was something uncanny about this old woman.

"Thank you," said Frances. "I will remember."

And Granny appeared content with the manner in which her offer was received.

"Tha con depend on me," she said, pulling the hood of her cloak more over her face. "Good-day."

"Good-day," said Frances, and Granny hobbled away more actively than one would have thought possible for her years.

"My dear!" ejaculated Nina, turning to look after the retreating figure, "that Wildersmoor product is the most alarming of any. Did you notice what she said of me? She is right. I am not a Woman; I am an Intelligence. Just that and nothing more. But Granny is the only individual who has had the sense to perceive that. Tell me her story. Why did her husband leave her? And what about the fisherman?"

"The moor people tell strange tales of her. Shall you repeat them to Mr. Paton? Because," with a half-laughing glance, "I should be sorry to bring ecclesiastical censure on poor Granny. Besides, the stories may not be true."

"You may feel quite secure about your pet witch. The greater the sinner the more I should strive to conceal from Cyril that sinner's peccadilloes, lest he should rake up some obsolete form of church discipline and thereby make a spectacle of himself. Also, as sinners form the majority, it is best to be on friendly terms with them."

"Well, the story goes that Granny's husband never ran away. People say that she incited the fisherman to murder him and hide him in one of the moor pools."

"What!" Mrs. Paton stopped, fairly aghast. "Do you think it is true? I don't believe it."

"Such is the depravity of human nature," Frances replied, "that I am afraid I should be rather disappointed if it were not true. While one believes it—I am strongly inclined to believe it—Granny Darlow is an interesting book into which one has had only a

peep and of which one wishes to read more. Whereas, if the story is mere idle gossip, Granny Darlow becomes decidedly more estimable, but decidedly less picturesque."

"I do not know," murmured Nina, doubtfully. Notwithstanding her general freedom of opinion, this amazing tale of Granny Darlow's youth had really shocked her.

Frances looked at her friend, smiled, and said:

"Now here is a strange thing. How differently the same things affect people. I see you are quite horror-stricken at poor Granny, while she interests me."

"Dreadful old creature!" with another backward glance at the little bent figure still visible among the dead bracken. "If it is true she ought to be taken up by the police."

"It is a long, long while ago, Nina; and there is so much dry stunted vegetation in the human forest that when one comes across a burning bush one must needs stand and wonder."

"Burning with very unholy fire," said Nina.

"I am not sure that the flame of Granny Darlow's spirit is unholy in itself," persisted Frances. "It may, by reason of ignorance, have lent itself to base purposes; but it seems to me too fierce, too enduring a flame to be wholly evil. Not the flame of Hell, but the flame of Purgatory, which, you know, Dante puts at white heat."

"Your favourite, Hawthorne, says that rampant unrestraint is the characteristic of wickedness."

"But was Granny's unrestraint rampant? Hawthorne would have rejoiced in her. She would have been another portrait in that weird gallery of his."

"I am surprised that the old woman should ever allude to her past," continued Mrs. Paton, musingly.

"Doubtless she was very silent when there was need for silence. Now she is so old that nothing she says matters."

The grey clouds covered the sky, yet the air was distinctly warmer. The faint wind was waxing in strength, and blowing in fitful little gusts. Nina looked at the glistening pools and shuddered. In which of them whitened the bones of the murdered man?

"I suppose," she said, "Granny was like the man who believed he had bought an Amati, and smashed it when he found it was only a common fiddle—one of a dozen made by John Smith. Yet how could the fiddle help it? These questions are too much for me; but if Granny's story is true, it proves the truth of all I say of Wildersmoor. Where else could you find such a murderous old witch?"

"In Æschylus, perhaps; or the Icelandic Sagas. There is a combined simplicity, and terribleness about the people here that often reminds me of those old tragedies. Their fatalism completes the resemblance."

"The whole place is a nightmare," Nina declared, emphatically, as the clipped yews and red roof of Sandhayes came in sight. "It is a nightmare, and the people dance to the tune of Tartini's dream."

Frances laughed.

"Tartini's dream interests me," she said.

CHAPTER VIII

THERE was little garden in front at Sandhayes. Merely a mossy lawn, with a large heart-shaped bed now gay with crocuses. A short broad gravel drive, a narrow fringe of shrubbery, then the wide road, the sandhills, and the sea. At the back of the house the garden expanded, and winding-box-bordered paths led from the house in various directions, reaching their respective goals in odd erratic manner. One path plunged through the orchard into the farmyard; another apparently intended to lead strollers on to the moor, for it advanced to the low thorn hedge dividing garden from moorland, then seeming to change its mind, retreated at an acute angle, meandered awhile among gooseberry bushes, and finally terminated its career at a summer-house as solidly constructed as that one in which Chaucer spent the summer night that he might see the daisies open at dawn. Close behind the summer-house a white gate opened into the large plantation. This path was the one Frances preferred, particularly in spring. She liked to sit in the rustic shelter and listen to the riotous singing of birds as they swung in the larches; while the perpetual hiss and rush of the sea filled the air with its accompanying undersong. There was much bird-singing in the wood to-day, but the Avelands, father and daughter, were strolling round the farm. There were just time to do

this between lunch and the first drops of the threatening rain.

They walked slowly, stopping now and then, heralded by the terrier Malise and escorted by Ptolemy, a stately cat with coat of glossy black and lustrous aquamarine eyes, who, according to feline custom, followed his mistress everywhere about Sandhayes, but not beyond; daintily sniffing at the crocuses bordering the path and regarding the gyrations of Malise with serene contempt.

Presently the little procession arrived at a walled enclosure originally intended for a cow-yard, but now containing some thirty black Berkshire pigs contentedly running about. Aveland leant his arms on the gate and contemplated them with much satisfaction. He prided himself on his Berkshires.

"They look well," he observed. "McKie said so this morning."

"Was Dr. McKie here this morning? I am sorry I was out."

"He inquired after you. I asked him to dine with us, as he said he had to see a patient on the moor this evening."

Dr. Aveland was a short man with broad shoulders, and a grave reflective expression, the same expression that was echoed in his daughter's face. There was a strong resemblance between them. Both had the same black hair—poppy-heart black, in Aveland's case thickly streaked with grey; the same straight black brows and finely-cut features, but Aveland's eyes were as dark as his hair; not the clear grey that shone so unexpectedly beneath his child's black lashes.

"Perhaps Nina and Mr. Paton may come in later,"

said Frances. "They are going to Riverton this afternoon and will not be home till eight."

"Missionary meeting, isn't it? Paton said something about it. He came with McKie and we had a look round. Not that Paton is interested in the farm. There's where he fails as a country parson. He has no eye for the weight of a pig or the state of the crops. He would do better in a town. Not a bad sort of fellow."

Frances contemplated the Berkshires in silence for a moment or two.

"I really must try to convert Nina to the beauties of pig-keeping," she said. "It has the double merit of antiquity and ease. Father, do you think a placid life the best?"

When Aveland felt amused, two or three horizontal wrinkles showed themselves in his forehead. They were visible now as he raised himself from his leaning attitude and regarded his daughter.

"Does your question refer to the pigs or to Mrs. Paton?"

"To neither. It refers to people generally."

Frances was recalling Nina Paton's words of the morning. Her father, however, had no clue to what was passing in her mind, and he tried painfully to guess the reason of her question. Knowing his own days were numbered, he earnestly desired a fair haven for his child, in which her life's barque might ride out in safety this world's storms. Such a haven he saw, or thought he saw, in a marriage with his old friend's son, Quentin Fleming. The young man's feelings Aveland had long ago discerned clearly enough, but his daughter was more complex. What

did she mean by a placid life? A life of ease and wealth passed with Quentin at the old Hall overlooking the familiar moor? Aveland shaped his reply accordingly.

"I think a placid life is usually the happiest," he said as they turned back to the house. "What does Verga say of the sweetness of the old familiar place, 'where even the very stones are one's friends, and where at night the lights shine out from the rooms where one has known all those one loves best.' Yes, my dear, to me a placid life seems most to be desired. It gives time for thought, for study, for enjoyment of earth and sky, for many things that are lost in turmoil."

"Yet turmoil brings out many good things that would otherwise be lost." Frances spoke meditatively, looking through the leafless trees at the faint sea-line.

"That is true. As the sea-gull grows strong-winged and the fisherman stout-hearted. But to my ears the hum of bees and the twitter of the goldfinch are sweeter than the sea-gull's scream; and while the fisherman's heart is being strengthened his wife's face is pale and his children cry." Aveland paused a moment, then resumed: "My dear, I can give you no better advice than Thoreau's, 'follow the bent of your genius closely.' Be yourself, not a weak imitation of someone else. If you are sure that your wing is as untiring as the sea-gull's, well and good. But it seems to me that peace is infinitely better than strength gained by battling with the storm. Of course," he added, with a smile, "I am speaking as one who has faced the tempest and grown weary. Perhaps had I never

done so I might feel differently, though I do not believe I should. Do you feel this place monotonous, my dear?"

"I? Oh, no. Not in the least." Frances spoke with real surprise. The idea of monotony had never occurred to her in connection with Wildersmoor. "Not in the least," she repeated, turning luminous grey eyes upon her father—eyes that echoed the smile that was curving her lips. "Other places are apt to become dull. This never."

She did not, however, explain why she had brought up the question of a placid life, and Aveland walked on thoughtfully, his hands clasped loosely behind his back.

"I am glad you are content here," he said. Then a memory came over him of the South; the blue sky, the heat, the white dust, the scent of pink hyacinths, a row of yellow hives on a whitewashed bench, dazzling in the sun. All that he liked better—far better than this sombre moor, and when illness seized him he would have returned to that village of his childhood had not his daughter existed. For her sake he spent his last years at Sandhayes, for what can a young life do cooped up in a country village with none but village folk around? Must it wither uselessly, all its possibilities wasted as the trodden grass by the roadside? Or must it rush friendless into the great world? When Aveland spoke of the exceeding good of a placid life he did not mean a stifled one. On Wildersmoor there was no stifling. There is ever a wide outlook in the north, and it is better to be free under a grey sky than a prisoner under a blue.

These thoughts passed, as they often did, vaguely

through Aveland's mind, and his daughter's next words oddly echoed them.

"I like the sense of freedom that Wildersmoor gives," she said. "There is no walling in. Here the moorland ends with the sea, and there in a hundred roads that flow away into the country. Elsewhere I feel cramped. Evidently I have a natural leaning towards the desert and the steppe, and anything that remotely resembles them."

Her father nodded.

"I understand. I should be well pleased if I could know you would always live on this moorland. But no man can control events when he is gone."

"Do not say that, father," slipping a firm round arm within his.

He looked at her with regretful tenderness.

"It must come some day, Frances. There must come a time when I shall be no longer here to advise or to modify the course of events. I earnestly hope your life may be a serene one, for you seem to me a plant that will thrive best in a still atmosphere. But we are talking so seriously that we have forgotten to visit the fowls."

Aveland looked pale and weary, so that his daughter took alarm, and, refusing to interview the fowls, swept him indoors and into a deep arm-chair that stood by the seaward window in the dining-room. For the Sandhayes dining-room was not the melancholy modern feeding-room with its chill air of disuse: it was a light and cheerful apartment in tones of tawny yellow and brown, and with two windows, one looking across the sandhills to where the sea, the great grey cat of Northern legend, stretched white paws of foam

over the pebbles, clawing, gathering, with soft murmuring purr and slumberous growl; the other window was by the fireplace, and commanded a wide view of the moor southward, with the Pike in the far distance. Through this window in the winter one could see Orion rise night after night with glittering belt and shield, unchanged as when he shone over Chaldea and was called Nimrod. The far end of the room was taken up by bookshelves. At Sandhayes there were books everywhere. "Why do you wish to set apart one room as a library?" Aveland would say, "Your whole house ought to be your library." For the rest, there were cosy corners and comfortable chairs, a carved oak settle by the large fireplace—all old fireplaces are large in the north; a few bronzes, two tall lamps with scarlet shades, and the general air of home that only comes to a room when it is constantly inhabited. Across the stone-flagged hall there was, indeed, a little drawing-room, all pink and crimson like a Rosamond pæony; and also with a seaward window; but in the long dining-room most of the day was passed, and, accordingly, it wore always an aspect of comfort and welcome."

"Ptolemy wants his cream," said Frances, stroking the cat's black head as he sat expectantly on his own particular cushion in the deep window-seat. "I shall not give you any tea, father, I will bring you some wine instead."

Aveland assented and leant back, watching his daughter's soft movements hither and thither.

"It is pleasant to be among one's belongings again," he said, glancing round the room. "The chief delight

of going away is the coming home. Curious how one becomes attached to one's impedimenta."

Frances laughed.

"Nina once confided to me that she had a violent desire to throw all the Vicarage chairs out of the window. It seemed so terrible to her that she might possibly sit in those same chairs for twenty years."

"I can understand her. Once I too felt like that. Mrs. Paton is an amusing woman. I like her extremely. She appears to me to be one who would not fail in emergency, nor forsake in poverty, as most people do."

"I am sure Nina would not forsake a friend because that friend was poor," said Frances, slowly, ministering the while to the patient bright-eyed spirits on either side of her: a saucer of cream for Ptolemy, a sweet biscuit for Malise. "Also, she would permit poverty to retain its individuality."

"That is a subtle distinction, and one which I should not have expected you to hit upon."

"Why not? I have noticed that everyone tries to destroy individuality in others, and poverty offers such a good chance for trampling it out, or trying to trample it out. But Nina is too original herself to wish to destroy originality in others."

"One's children are singular echoes sometimes," Aveland said, reflectively, "echoes of one's own long-past feelings and aspirations. You often utter thoughts, Frances, that I have brooded over as a younger man. I could imagine strange unconscious vengeance coming that way. A parent—father or mother—oppressed and too helpless to retort, and the

fierce suppressed bitterness blazing out long years after in the child who is the destined avenger."

A little silence, save for the cheerful babble of the fire and the rush and roar of the sea. That rush sounded more clearly now, for the tide had turned and a westerly wind was helping it, so that the white foam-paws of the grey sea-cat ran swiftly round and over the sandhills in terrible resistless playfulness. How our Viking ancestors loved that same grey cat! As mighty hunters were laid in their tombs with favourite dog and horse, so the old sea-kings must needs have sea burial; that ever those soft white paws might guard their whitening bones, and the murmuring purr and savage growl be their ceaseless requiem.

Ptolemy, the mere flesh and blood feline, having finished his saucer of cream by licking it round in neat and workmanlike fashion, humped his back, sat down, washed his face, then sprang lightly as thistledown on the arm of Aveland's chair, where he crouched and watched with half-shut eyes Malise begging for more sugar and biscuits. Darker masses of cloud came rolling up from the west, and the leafless honeysuckle on the porch stretched out long brown fingers, tapping on the window as the rising wind tossed its tangled stems. A few heavy drops of rain fell. The wind changed its character and came in gusts. A strong gale was blowing up.

"Do you hear wheels, father?"

Aveland listened a moment.

"I think so," he said. "Very likely it is Quentin."

It was Quentin. In a few minutes he stood in the doorway, a tall and stately figure, like young Tamlin in the old ballad, bringing with him into the warm

flower-scented atmosphere a breath of the wet freshness of moor and sea.

"A regular thaw, is it not?" he said, shaking hands. "How did you get home last night? Not too tired by the journey? Hullo, Malise, old fellow!" He patted the terrier, and softly pulled Ptolemy's left ear, who acknowledged the attention by a little gurgle —animals instinctively appreciated Fleming.

"Father is tired, though he will not acknowledge it," said Frances. "How is it that we hear wheels, and yet you arrive on foot? And where is your familiar?"

"My familiar has muddy paws, so I have left him outside. I walked from the village and sent the dog-cart on. I rather imagine, Dr. Aveland, that it has taken shelter in your barn."

Aveland rang the bell.

"I'll have the horse taken out. You will stay and dine with us, Quentin?"

"Thank you. I shall be very glad. I don't whoop for joy when I sit down to my solitary meal."

"Bran is invited also. Where did you leave him?" Frances inquired. She was fond of the great deer-hound who followed Quentin up and down the country. "Muddy paw-marks on the carpet are evidences of human sympathy with canine difficulties, and therefore not objected to. I must go and look for him."

Fleming jumped up.

"No—no. I will fetch him. I have no doubt he has already ventured indoors."

He returned in a minute or two with the dog, and remarked on a pair of antlers he had noticed in the hall:

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"New, are they not? I don't recollect seeing them before."

"Melville sent them to me while we were away," Aveland replied. "I unpacked them this morning. A well-meant, yet barbarous present. Why should I wish to adorn my home with portions of my fellow-creatures? One might as well hang up a man's ears on the walls, or utilize them as bell-pulls."

"They are grand antlers, though," said Fleming. "Where shall you put them up?"

"Must I put them up? The Dyaks hang strings of their enemies' heads across their apartments. It appears to me that the Dyak has a better excuse than I. At least the heads of those of aggressive enemies. Your pardon, Quentin, I had forgotten your trophies at the Hall."

"Oh, you are quite right, Dr. Aveland. I acknowledge myself a civilized Dyak. Doubtless, I am reverting to some wolf-hunting ancestor when I rejoice over my ibex horns; and the wolf-hunter had the better reason—he needed the skins for clothing."

"Ah, our ancestors!" said Frances. "I rejoice greatly in being a nineteenth-century ghost. One can live in and sympathize with every century and the actors therein. I mean, one can throw oneself back to some ancestral artist-soul, and see the colours of the world; to a musician, and hear the wonders of sound; or to a sculptor, and see the forms of things; to an alchemist, and linger over a crucible; or to some sea-rover, and set sail again as he did; and enjoy the swing of the seas all the more because the artist-soul has transmitted his eye for the green of the waves, and the sculptor his eye for their form, and the musi-

cian his ear for the dash of the surf and the whistle of the wind. Yes, it is well to be the latest-born of time. The one man I sincerely pity is Adam. I am afraid, father, you must submit to having the antlers hung somewhere within sight, otherwise poor Mr. Melville's feelings will be so hurt if he chances to come."

"And my feelings?" inquired Aveland, with a humorous glance. "Well, I give in. For a short time, I pocket my convictions. I only stipulate that these remnants of my brother the stag be not flourished too conspicuously before my eyes."

Quentin turned to Frances.

"Suppose we hang them up now?" he suggested. "How about that dark corner by the hall-door? I could get them up there for you in no time. This is the sort of day to make oneself useful indoors."

It certainly was not a day to make oneself useful out of doors. The whistle of the wind had risen to a scream, and the rain beat fiercely against the windows, and through the gathering dusk one could see the white flash of foam as the waves rolled in and broke thunderously on the beach.

Wild weather makes indoor comfort the more exquisite and the more picturesque. The stone-flagged hall at Sandhayes was rather large, having originally been the common living-room of the old farm-house, for which reason it possessed a noble fireplace. This stormy afternoon the firelight glinted merrily on stone and rafter, precisely as it had ever done since the first fire roared up the great chimney. For the Avelands had made no attempt to modernize this part of the house. They left the stone floor, dark wainscoting,

and whitewashed walls as they had found them, merely adding a few black oak chairs with straight carved backs and a sideboard of the same. A fluffy white rug lay in front of the fire, giving another tone of white to be flushed by the ruddy light; and here and there stood large pots—the ordinary red garden flower-pots —full of lilies of the valley. In some subtle fashion this entrance-hall so harmonized with the country without that it seemed a part of it; so bare, so simple, yet so individual that, once seen, it could not be forgotten. It was essentially northern. Othere, the old sea-captain,

> "With a kind of laugh in his speech,
> Like the sea-tide on a beach,"

might have walked in from the gale, and sat and warmed himself before the great fireplace without any sense of incongruity; while the leaping flames threw his shadow up among the rafters among other dancing shadows, and the scent of the lilies of the valley reminded him of the brief northern summer long ago, when, perhaps, he gathered them for some fair-haired Thora or Dagmar.

By the time Fleming had got the antlers into the middle of the floor, and a stolid stable-boy had brought a pair of steps, and Frances had found hammer and nails, there was not much daylight in the hall, so dark was the sky and so narrow the one long window by the door. But the fire made noble amends, blazing more fiercely for the draughts that whistled through the keyhole, and swept under the massive door.

"Your lilies are sweet," said Quentin, mounting

the steps, hammer in hand. "They are fine ones, too —better than mine. Where did you get them?"

Frances was standing on the white rug, stirring the coals to yet brighter flames.

"At Aston's," she replied, naming a Woffendale nurseryman. "Was it not contemptible of us to buy instead of growing them ourselves?"

"No, I think it very reasonable. You get all the beauty without the trouble, and help a man to live besides."

"I feel convinced that to be always buying and never making is a loss somehow. I am a firm believer in planting one's own vine and one's own fig-tree, and eating of the fruit thereof. It is not the same thing to eat of the fruit of another man's vine and fig."

"No, but it's a good deal easier," said Quentin.

Whereupon they both laughed, and their laughter came pleasantly to Aveland's ears through the half-open door of the dining-room where he sat thinking of many things, as those do who are dying and know it. For, being himself a medical man, Aveland knew the hopelessness of his own case, and could trace his own failing strength day by day. How infinitely easier it would be to part with life if he could leave Frances the wife of his old friend's son; for himself being gone, who could tell what might happen. He knew well the wide clear-sightedness and instinctive nobility of his child's mind; but he also knew that there is no clear-sightedness in respect of marriage, and noble instincts are no safeguards against the irreparable mistake of an unhappy union. If Frances did not marry Quentin Fleming, whom would she choose?

It was possible that she might not marry at all, but the solitary position in which she would be left made her marriage more probable. And why should she not be happy with some other man? There were many good fellows in the world besides Fleming. Yet Aveland, whose soul was wrapped up in his daughter, tormented himself with the fear that she would perhaps choose one not of these: one despicable, worthless, intolerable. Her father imagined himself a powerless spirit on the farther side of death, enduring the hell of beholding that beloved daughter in misery for want of his protecting presence. Harassed by these thoughts, that beat upon his mind incessantly, as the long surf beat upon the sandhills beyond his windows, the sick man watched the life around him with pathetic earnestness, secretly counting the fast diminishing months of the span allotted to him, ever hoping events might so happen that when he departed, it would be in peace. Thus he listened, well-pleased, to the young folks' voices and laughter. Then came the sound of hammering. Quentin was driving in a nail.

"That will do for one," he said, stepping down and hunting in the tool-box. "Now for another." He took out a long nail and contemplated it; the firelight throwing his magnified shadow against the white wall, like a phantom of Thor, hammer in hand.

"I do not much believe in the beauty of work. There is too much of the busy bee in these days. One thinks of butterflies with positive relief."

"'Those souls which the ancients call bees,'" said Frances, quoting Porphyry.

"Yes, but the butterfly is a soul too, and it flies higher. It is time somebody preached the beauty of

idleness. I told Paton so this afternoon, but he didn't seem to see it."

"The remark arose out of what?"

"Out of Old Will Elliot's refusal to bow down before the modern idol Sanitation."

"Oh," cried Frances, laughter sparkling in her eyes, "is the dear old man as dirty as ever? I have not heard any of the village news yet."

"He is down with lumbago, and Paton wishes to have the cottage cleaned—also Will himself. Will objects. Says he has never been washed since he was a baby, and doesn't consider it wholesome, and quotes himself, and our grandfathers generally as proofs of the wholesomeness of dirt. I confess he makes out a strong case. As I am his landlord, Paton appealed to me, and we three argued the matter this afternoon—with no result whatever. It seems that when McKie went to see the old man this morning, Paton was there to explain his views, and McKie quite agreed as to the dirty cottage; but thought the cleaning of it should be left till Will was better, and that Will himself should be left in unwashed peace."

"I think Dr. McKie is right," said Frances. She was sitting on an oak bench by the fire, her hands loosely clasped in her lap, and Fleming's dog—who had followed his master out of the dining-room—crouched at her feet, his head on his paws. Quentin had pulled up a low stool. As for the antlers, there was plenty of time for them. It was more pleasant just now to sit and talk to Frances Aveland about old Will Elliot's idiosyncrasies.

"So do I," he said in reply, "but of course McKie was certain to back up Will against Paton. You know

Paton and McKie never hit it off. Besides, Elliot is a Border man, and naturally to both McKie and Will, Paton is 'just Southron.' It is not in human nature for a canny Scot to foregather with a Southron against one so near akin as a Borderer. Paton tells me that McKie says that 'Elliot shows a grand steadfastness: it is a real pity he is not a Presbyterian.' Which is pure aggravation on McKie's part."

Frances laughed again.

"And of course to you as well as to Dr. McKie and old Will, Mr. Paton is 'just a Southron,' and you are preparing to back the north."

"And are not you?"

"Yes, but it is rather hard on Mr. Paton."

"Everything is hard on somebody," returned Fleming philosophically.

"Certainly, it would be hardest for old Will to be compelled to cleanliness. I should consider that a violation of the liberty of the subject."

"A good many modern laws are violations of the liberty of the subject," said Fleming. "In fact, there is very little liberty left. In this case, however, the subject will not be harried, because I could make things unpleasant for the harriers. There are wheels within wheels, you see. When there are not, it is bad for those whom the outside wheels are grinding."

"Mr. Paton believes in doctors, all and sundry," said Frances. "He even believes in the modern distinguished fashionable doctor, who wishes to regulate existence—that is, other people's existence—according to his whim of the moment. We must have no religion, because that is distinctly a sign of brain-disease. We must neither eat nor drink but by order.

No food or medicine to be sold unless prescribed by family physician. Patients also compelled by law to swallow said prescription whether they wish to do so or not. Scene in court: John Smith, charged with refusing to take his physic—fourteen days without option of fine. Mary Brown, similar charge with aggravated circumstances of throwing her medicine out of the window—twenty-one days."

"It is evident," said Quentin, "that under such a régime you would be a fellow-martyr with Mary Brown."

"Of course. In fact, I should get six months, as I should probably assault the physician. If," continued Frances, musingly, "old Will were doing something outrageous it would be different."

"Such as tanning hides in his front garden for instance. As it is, there is nothing much to complain of. In these matters it is best to keep a middle course. No use either tipping the cart over the precipice or jamming it against the rock. I pointed this out to Paton when he spoke of the good of the community."

"Witches were burnt for the good of the community not so very long ago," said Frances. "I should respect the rights of the individual more than the good of the community. For one thing, it is so difficult to tell what *is* the good of the community. I am sure it would not be for its good to be perpetually coerced or to behold coercion. That sort of thing makes slaves and tyrants. There are so many questions arising. Old Will is dirty, but happy. Is it better to be dirty and happy, or clean and miserable?"

"I should say be dirty and happy."

"I am not certain of that, except in Will's case."

"You would let him alone?"

"I would adopt Dr. McKie's compromise and clean the cottage only."

"Very well. That is settled."

Fleming rose, picking up an antler, laughed suddenly, and resumed:

"You have no idea how the old man worries Paton. He—Will, I mean—having plenty of time on his hands, solemnly spells through such books as chance sends him. Chance once sent a short history of the Christian Fathers, who, as you know, were not renowned for devotion to the tub. Old Will now quotes them with delight and says, 'Ah, parson, them wur sensible fellows!'"

Frances laughed too.

"Tell me when the scrubbing of the cottage is to take place, and I will present Will with some of his favourite 'baccy,' to console him for the affliction of a clean house."

"Well, as the frost has broken up, to-morrow may be mild. If so, I shall come over in the morning and superintend the cleaning. It will go more smoothly if I am there. Paton generously offers to supply soap and charwomen."

"Does he? I wonder what Nina will say if he requisitions her best scrubbing-brushes! I think I had better send up some old ones. Also a hoe. I am sure the floor will need a hoe."

"I daresay it will, and we shall be grateful for the brushes. Come and look at the performance, will you not? The old man admires you greatly."

"I know he does. That is why I give him 'baccy.'"

"Do you always know a man's thought?" Fleming

was putting up the second antler. He turned his head as he spoke, looking across the hall to where Frances sat with Bran at her feet.

"That depends on the man," she said. "For instance, I can generally guess Dr. McKie's."

"Oh, McKie!—" with good-humoured impatience, "I meant——"

"So you have got the antlers up," said Aveland, coming out of the dining-room, and Quentin's meaning remained unexplained. He stepped down and critically surveyed his work.

"Do you like them there, Dr. Aveland?"

"I like them nowhere, my dear boy, but they are better in that corner than anywhere else, because not so obtrusive."

"They suit the place, I think," said Frances. "There is a barbaric simplicity about our hall that harmonizes with antlers and weapons, only we have none of the latter."

"Say poetic simplicity," replied her father. "You picture the old-time hunter feathering his arrows by the firelight. Why not the old-time poet seeing dreams in the burning logs while the storm wars outside?—

> 'For the dreamer lives for ever,
> While the toiler dies in a day.'"

The deerhound lifted his head and growled, and Malise barked shrilly, but apparently they both recognized the approaching footsteps, for Bran laid his head down again on his paws, while the terrier ran to the door expectantly.

CHAPTER IX

THE visitor was McKie. He came in dripping like a water-dog from the fierce rain—a tall gaunt figure in a rough travelling coat down to his heels and a soft felt hat pulled over his ears.

Through the open door rushed clearly for a moment all the sounds of the world outside: confused voices of tumultuous spirits, elemental genii who have not yet attained to articulate speech—the hiss of the surf and clash of the shingle, the sibilant rustle of wet laurels, the dry creaking of leafless branches, and, above and over all, the exultant shout of the sea-wind. Then the door closed and the voices blended into a confused clamour, that, like all such clamour, had nothing dissonant about it but rather fell upon the ear as something soothing and friendly.

"It's a grand thaw," said McKie, complacently, pulling off his soaked hat and coat. "There's naething like the climate of the British Isles, particularly in the north. Neither hot nor cold, but just comfortable, and a wee glint of the sun now and then."

"Wee, indeed!" retorted Aveland, laughing, "about two hours of sunshine a week!"

"Weel, it's the mair appreciated. Miss Frances, you are bonnier than ever, if that may be. I would I were forty years younger."

"Come and sit here, Dr. McKie," patting the chair next to hers.

"Ah," taking the seat indicated, "the verra invitation tells of those forty years too many. Ye would not smile on me like that and ask me to sit next ye if I were twenty-four instead of sixty-four. But it's verra gratifying; like the scent of the rose by the auld man's path when his time for roses is o'er."

"Why, doctor, I had no idea you were a poet," said Fleming.

"It's just the occasion, lad. The man—auld or young—who would not become a poet when Miss Frances smiles on him, is a worthless loon. Weel," settling himself in his chair, "there's an auld-world cosiness about your hall, Aveland, that cheers a man's soul. Just the fireside circle, nae light but the fire's own, and the doggies at one's feet."

It was Aveland's custom in winter thus to sit in the firelit hall as twilight fell, waiting as it were for any guest, chance or expected; while about the house began that pleasant stir which heralds dinner.

"Ay," repeated McKie, "it cheers a man's soul. And there's the lily-scent coming out of the shadows as it does on a May night."

In McKie's voice was a tone of faraway regret and vain longing, the backward longing of a man for his youth and the blossoming thereof.

"No time like the Maytime, eh, McKie?" responded his host, "and it never returns. I doubt whether Eternity itself can restore that sense of irresponsible gladness which is ours for so short a time."

"Man!" said McKie, emphatically, "if I could but get rid of this stiffness in my bones, and pit ma curls again o'er my bald head, I'd feel that same irresponsible gladness as strongly as ever. It's just sickening to

awake in the morn feeling myself a boy, and then to look in the glass and see myself a bald-headed auld fool!"

Aveland sighed and looked at the leaping tongues of flame. McKie's spirit had not encountered such storms of fortune as Aveland's, and was better fitted to withstand them if it had. That the wind is tempered to the shorn lamb is a saying as remarkable for its mendacity as for its cheerfulness. A flash of bitterness passed over Aveland's face; then his sombre eyes lightened as he looked across the wide hearth at the two still in their Maytime, who were talking softly together.

"Never mind, doctor," said Quentin. "I once met a Lincolnshire man—capital fellow he was, too—who stoutly maintained that 'nothing matters so long as you're happy.'"

"Ma certes, laddie, but that's awful doctrine! Just think where it would lead ye."

"Who knows? Perhaps to the Fortunate Isles."

> "'Look as I may into the things of life,
> Mirth is the only good, the rest is naught.
> If in your heart the light of love you plant,
> Hell it will fear not, Heaven it will not want,'"

quoted Aveland. "Omar Khayyam is on your side, Quentin. Who are we that we should contradict Omar Khayyam?"

"Aveland, I'm surprised at ye. There's a man's wurr-r-k." McKie's North British r's became more emphatic as his earnestness increased.

"Ripples on the sand, McKie," replied his host, lazily, "ripples that the next wave obliterates. A man's thoughts will last centuries. His most toilsome work

often not one. Long ago there were three schoolfellows; two of them men of action, the third a dreamer. Of the two first, one rose to be a great Minister and was murdered by order of the second, who had become the Sheik of the Assassins. The third lived to be a Singer, singing of life and love, and of the roses scattered by the north wind. Now, centuries later, what remains of the Minister's measures or the Assassin's deeds? But to-day we read the songs of Omar Khayyam."

"I am a great admirer of literature," said McKie, sturdily, "but I have always regarded the thoughts of great men as incentives to worthy action, not persuasions to sit by the roadside lamenting."

"I was not lamenting," Fleming protested. "I was uttering most cheerful sentiments."

"And I think the Lincolnshire man was extremely sensible," said Frances.

McKie looked from one to the other.

"I'll not argue with ye. A man of my wisdom knows better than to argue with young people. It's just waste of time and breath. And Aveland backing ye up, too! If ye were all bald-headed like me, ye'd agree with every word I say. See a knot of bald-headed men talking together and ye'll find their opinions are in harmony. It's the baldness that brings wisdom by sweeping the soul of personal vanity. Speaking of baldness reminds me, Quentin, that I met Rusholme this afternoon, and he told me your uncle intended increasing the reward offered. Is that so?"

"There has been some thought of it."

"Whether increased or not, I should doubt the reward finding the man," said Aveland. "The act was

either private revenge or an attempt at robbery; probably the latter. If the latter, the chances of discovering the fellow are considerably lessened. He gained nothing, so there is nothing to track him by. Blind John's recognition of a stranger's voice could hardly be relied upon, at least that is my impression. Also, even if John did find the man whom he guided, the fact of that man crossing Wildersmoor by no means proves him to have been the murderer."

"It was verra suspicious," McKie shook his head as he said this, feeling sorely oppressed by his promise to Quentin not to mention Ulyett's name. Daily the Scotchman had groaned in spirit over the burning of that letter. He had not liked Ralph, but neither did he like Ulyett. Therefore, as a matter of abstract justice, he considered the latter ought not to escape. Ulyett's guilt McKie held clearly proven.

"It was suspicious," assented Aveland, "but many innocent acts have excited grave suspicion in similar cases."

"If the man is innocent," persisted McKie, "why can he not come forward and state fairly that he crossed the moor with Blind John? He must have seen the whole affair in the papers."

"That can hardly be expected," said Quentin, and Frances noticed the earnestness of his tone. "He may have a dozen reasons—innocent, strong, private reasons—for not wishing to own he was on Wildersmoor that night. Or he may keep quiet from the simple fear of being suspected—which he is."

Aveland put a question.

"Had your cousin any expectation of being attacked by anyone?"

"Oh, no. Not to my knowledge at least. I do not think Ralph was under the slightest apprehension of that sort."

"He was big enough to defend himself," observed McKie. "It is hard to understand how he could be struck down as he was, and with his own stick, too. Whoever did it had a strong arm, as I said at the time. It just puzzles me. Blind John is positive the man he guided was tall, but not so tall as you and your cousin, Quentin."

"When did John say that?"

"To-day. I met him on the moor, and had a talk with him."

"How can he judge of anyone's height?" this from Frances.

"By the way the voice reached his ears. He says it came level with the top of his own head."

"I daresay he is right," remarked Aveland. "A man who has lost one of his senses is difficult to deceive; he is so uncommonly sharp with the others."

McKie continued in his slow exact manner:

"Altogether, we know from John that the man he guided was educated, young, active, tall, and an Englishman; for a man born north of the Tweed would have had mair sense than to give five shillings when one would have amply satisfied."

Aveland laughed outright: "No one will contradict you there, McKie."

"The way ye fling money about is just awful," went on McKie, warming to the subject. "One wad think sixpences grew like blackberries! I'm no wishing to find fault with ye, but there's no denying ye are a wasteful nation."

He proceeded to give various instances of Southron waste, a change of conversation that was a relief to Fleming. He knew the Scotchman would keep his promise respecting the letter, yet whenever keen wits circled round that unknown companion of the blind man, Quentin felt as though any moment might bring up Ulyett's name in connection with that journey. He drew a sigh of relief when "saxpences" became the staple of McKie's discourse. "At any rate, that was over for the present," he thought, as he turned to speak to Frances. She was sitting beside him, meditatively stroking Ptolemy's silky coat. That sociable feline had no mind to remain in the dining-room without the society of his human friends. He had followed Aveland into the hall and jumped on his mistress's lap, where he purred contentedly. Firelight is a becoming illumination. It softens wrinkles, throws grey hair into shade, warms the haggard cheeks of starvation with the glow of health; and when the illumined face is young and beautiful, when the ruddy flames tantalize with their glancing light, revealing here a delicately-moulded chin, and leaving the mouth in shadow—there deep shining eyes and all else dimly outlined. Thus the firelight played about Frances as she sat, and Quentin looked, and thought her fairer than ever. A spirit of recklessness came over him. If Ulyett were suspected? well, there must be some if's in life. A man could not creep along like one palsied, no matter what "if" barred the way. It is "the timid who anticipate that which may never be."

By what delicate influences is thought transmitted? Ulyett's name had not been mentioned, but McKie had thought of him, and Fleming's mind tumultuously cir-

cled round him; and now Frances, still stroking the purring Ptolemy, said softly:

"Did you know that poor Jack Ulyett came to see us before he sailed?"

"No, I had not heard. When was it?"

"It was the night of the fog." She would not say "the night of the murder." The word had an ugly sound, and the dead man was Quentin's cousin. Besides, she had noticed that he did not like McKie's handling of the subject.

"We wondered how he had found his way," Frances continued. "He said he had come from the station. The road is tolerably straight, you know, and the frozen ruts guided his feet. He confessed, however, that he had used up a whole box of matches in looking for the gate, and finally ran into the teapot. It was rather late when he came, past ten, and he apologised for the hour and for any damage he might have done to the yew. He seemed rather downhearted. I suppose the West Coast is not a very cheerful place to live in. He said he had been bidding good-bye to everyone. We were the last. I think he would have gone on to the Vicarage, but I told him they were away. Nina was sorry to have missed him. He is rather a favourite of hers."

"Ulyett gets on well with most people. He is an easy-going good-tempered sort of fellow. By the way, his cousin Isabel is engaged to young Haslam. That is the first news I heard in Woffendale this morning."

Fleming talked on, feeling a wholly unreasonable anger against poor Jack for "making calls in the middle of the night," as he mentally phrased it. Here was another danger, a proof that Ulyett was on the

moor that fatal evening. The visit was not only known to the Avelands, but also to the Sandhayes servants; and possibly to some of the villagers to whom he might have applied for guidance in the fog. He must have lost his way again and wandered about for three hours or so, for Blind John left him in front of North Rode station before seven o'clock, and he did not appear at Sandhayes till past ten. Perhaps he had gone to some other house on the moor? A chance word uttered by anyone, a little discussion of this and that, and Ulyett would be identified with the traveller whom public opinion regarded as Ralph's murderer. At this point of his meditations Fleming pitchforked, as it were, his reflections to the back of his mind, there to wait till recalled. His northern fatalism came to his aid and buoyed him up, as undoubtedly it does. His spirits rose again, his anger vanished. McKie was still busy reproving the wastefulness of the English nation, Aveland listening with a half-smile. Frances had inherited that gift for listening, and Fleming found himself, as usual, telling her all that he had heard in Woffendale that morning, all that was going on at the Works, and his various plans respecting the Wildersmoor property; while the rain, driven by the gale, beat against the long narrow window like a hunted thing striving to enter that warm quiet hall. Now and then a heavy drop fell down the wide chimney and hissed in the red heart of the fire. However, to three of those who sat by the great fireplace the beating rain brought no saddening thoughts. Only Aveland, born and cradled in southern sunshine, felt its depressing influence. To McKie it was " just saft weather," no more. To Frances and Quentin the rush of the wind's wet

wings was one of the natural sounds of Wildersmoor. Whether the rain spread a soft veiling drizzle over sandhills and moor, filling the air with freshness, or whether, as now, it swept from seawards in pale sheets of solid water, it never seemed—probably because the climate was so equable—to cause any inconvenience to the natives.

On Wildersmoor that same grey rain was a familiar presence. Its soft swish mingled with their dreams and greeted them on waking. Sunshine was linked in their minds with glittering waterdrops and floating mist; with moist warm air drawn upward from deep moss and grassy hollows, where hemlock and shining marsh marigold grew tall and rank, and feathery meadowsweet shook its scented plumes. Hence, with whatever murmuring breath or strong crying the west wind might wail over shore and sea, its song always seemed, in the ears of those who listened, to be the song they loved most. Did any despair? Then the rushing wings were those of the Angel of the Lord, the Swordbearer, beneath whose shadow is the peace of Death. Did any hope? Did any love? Then the wild gale was the breath of Life, the fulness of Life—jubilant, immortal. "By Wind and Sword," swore the Scythians; by Life and Death. And these two are one.

CHAPTER X

DINNER was over at Sandhayes. Though Frances's little rose-pink drawing-room was warm and brightly lit, they had all drifted back to the long dining-room, which was Aveland's favourite room. It always looked absolutely comfortable, and particularly so on a winter evening like this, when the firelight helped the tall scarlet-shaded lamps to throw a ruddy glow on its yellow-brown tones, making an autumn harmony.

"Our fathers' fashions are best for country life," Aveland was wont to say. "Town customs imply hurry and the presence of strangers. Here we have neither."

Therefore the eye rested gratefully on the dark, shining surface of the table, whereon stood wine, and fruit, and coffee, the black polished oak reflecting little sparkles and gleams from glass and silver. Fleming was sitting at the piano. He had been singing—possessing a fine voice, as became his Norse ancestry. Frances had moved to the sea-window, and drawn aside the curtain to look out into the night. The rain did not beat so loudly now against the house. The crying voice without was dying away in gusty sobbings, as though exhausted by fruitless effort, and minded to flee away seaward, there to rest with all forgotten things, whether bones or jewels. This being so, it was possible that Nina Paton and her husband

might come in on their way home from Riverton. Aveland and McKie were by the fireplace in a deep discussion and two armchairs.

"Ye are wrong about the Meigle stones," said McKie.

"You see, Quentin," said Aveland, "we are still throwing stones at each other."

"But if you cannot agree, what is the use of arguing?" This practical inquiry came from Frances.

"That observation, my dear, is full of the deepest wisdom. Unhappily, the less chance there is of men agreeing, the more they wrangle."

"It is verra certain that Arthur's kingdom should be placed much farther north than it usually is," said McKie earnestly.

"No use looking to me for assistance, doctor," said Fleming, rising; "I'd rather leave Arthur down south, considering the character given him in the ballad:—

> "'When good King Arthur ruled this land,
> He was a goodly king:
> He stole three pecks of barley-meal,
> To make a bag-pudding!'"

"There's another proof!" cried McKie, triumphantly. "The auld ballad preserves tradition. Nae doubt the pudding was haggis! I'll forgive ye for laughing; laughter canna alter facts. The pudding was haggis! Mercy on us! What's that? Is it yon parson?"

"That" was a loud double knock at the front door, and, as McKie surmised, it heralded Cyril Paton and his wife.

"This is truly noble of you, Nina," said Frances, assisting her friend out of a cloud of wrappings.

"Cyril said you would never expect us on such a night, but I told him I understood Wildersmoor better than that."

"Well," said Paton, emerging from a rain-soaked coat, "it appeared to me unreasonable, not to say unfriendly, to bring two muddy people into your house at this time of night without provocation."

The Vicar was a good-looking man, rather stout, with a full brown beard that he cherished exceedingly, a pleasant manner, a clear fine voice. Regarding him critically, his wife's idea of a bishopric for him seemed appropriate. The episcopal dignity would become him, and, being a kindly man, he would use it no worse than others, perhaps better.

"We gave the provocation of inviting you," said Aveland.

"I think I must have come even if you had not asked us, Dr. Aveland." Nina's grey-blue eyes brightened as she spoke. "I sorely need mental refreshment after a dose of missionary and muffins. How delightful your rooms always look! Mine are hopelessly modern. Don't repeat anything I say, Dr. McKie. But I know you will not. Nor you, Mr. Fleming. Sandhayes is my confessional, and my remarks are privileged."

"What have you been doing at Riverton?" asked Quentin. "One of the regulation church tea-fights? Sometimes I help at them. You should see me cutting the cake. Two slices for each person; a third when the recipient is under twenty."

"I wish you had been there. I only got one piece. It was very good. Not so the address."

Paton did not hear his wife's remark. "We had a

most interesting account of missionary work in West Africa," he observed to the world in general, after warmly greeting Fleming, who, as a good Churchman, a large landowner with the Atlas Works at his back, and a young man, was precious indeed—and rightly so—in the Vicar's eyes.

"Well, Cyril, it seems to me that these missions expend a quite terrible amount of toil with almost infinitesimal results. I am inclined to think that one reason of the comparative failure is the want of energetic spinsters to go among the women. The poor wives of the missionaries have enough to do in that climate to look after their own and their husbands' health. Also, the natives are not sufficiently impressed. It is my belief that if Maskelyne and Cooke were sent out with a detachment of suitable spins, they would convert more of Africa in six months than all the missions in twenty years. Their tricks would beat the Voodoo doctors all to nothing."

"That is a grand idea, Mrs. Paton," said McKie. "It's a real pity it canna be tried. It would be fighting the Evil One with his ain weapons."

The Vicar drew himself up, and stroked his beard while he meditated reproof. He was annoyed both with his wife and with McKie; more particularly with McKie, whose aggressive independence of thought and speech jarred every fibre of Paton's being. Naturally, he held that upon matters connected with his profession no outsider had any right to express an opinion. This is a mental attitude shared by the other professions. Ninety-five doctors out of every hundred deny the right of any being to have ideas respecting maladies or treatment of maladies, even his own, or

upon any question connected with their guild. As for law, observe to a lawyer that most law is in direct antagonism to common sense and common justice, and he will reply, "It is the law," much as an old Greek might have said, "Yonder shadow in the path is the great god, Pan—horns, hoofs, and all. Worship him." It is useless to point out that neither Pan nor the law was ever anything but a fancy, an opinion of this or that generation. It is the god Pan. That is enough; there is no more to be said. In short, neither our souls nor our bodies are any concern of ours, and as for our minds, we have no right to use them.

So the argumentative combative turn of McKie's mind was not agreeable to Paton. But the North Briton was as prickly to handle as his national emblem, therefore the Vicar preferred to administer a reproof obliquely.

"My dear Nina, jesting on these subjects——"

Here Aveland struck in—

"Never mind, Paton, Sandhayes gives sanctuary to all erratic opinions, as the Church gave it to those individuals who disturbed their neighbours' minds, either by reason of the refugees' just rights or their inherent crookedness."

"Sanctuary was not extended to scoffers," said Paton.

McKie rushed to battle with a snort.

"The Church was verra hospitable. She never grudged a good fire wherewith to warm the scoffer."

"Now, doctor," interposed Quentin, seeing wrath in the Vicar's eye, "you know very well that the little failing to which you so unkindly allude is merely an

unfortunate weakness of human nature. Everybody burns, or would like to burn, those who do not agree with them. Nobody likes to be contradicted. Nero burnt the Christians; then the Christians burnt each other. The Puritans set up a howl about the persecutions they suffered—and whipped Quakers when they got out to New England. Our modern unbelievers would burn us believers if they could. No one can doubt that who observes their rabid bitterness against the Christian faith. Human nature, McKie, not the Church. One can hardly help persecuting a man for his religious or non-religious opinions; they are so annoying."

"Quentin, if ye had lived in earlier times ye'd have been a Crusader, harrying other folks' homes in the name of the Lord."

"And what would you have been?" retorted Fleming. "A Border chieftain, lifting your neighbours' cattle in the name of Buccleugh."

McKie's rugged features relaxed into a smile.

"I'll no contradict ye. Those must have been grand times!"

Frances raised her straight black brows. "Hear him!—Dr. McKie regretting that he cannot plunder the fowl-house and empty the stables!"

"Dr. McKie must permit me," said the Vicar, who had recovered his good-humour, "to protest against his assertion that the Church of England is a persecuting church. Errors of judgment must occur in everything worked by man, but tolerance has always been her distinguishing characteristic. It is her reasonableness that continually excites animosity. Men complain

she is not sufficiently this or that, forgetting that she is the Church of the Nation, not of any one particular sect in it."

"That is true," Aveland agreed. "I think there is more liberty of private thought and action in our Church than in any other religious community."

"Weel, I am willing to acknowledge that it's better to be priest-ridden than doctor-ridden, and ye stand mair chance of the latter now-a-days. It is not the Church I am so set against as—putting yourself and a few others aside, Mr. Paton—her loons o' ministers. However, I'll say nae mair just now, save that ye are mistaken when ye call me a scoffer, for that I am not."

"Nor I," said Nina. "Really, Cyril, I was not scoffing. I was seriously reflecting on the blacks' welfare. Now I will restrict my remarks to the whites. How fearfully heavy the Rusholmes are! One never knows what to say to the girls. They were both at the Riverton meeting to-night. Isabel fortunately absorbed in her fiancé. But the other one, Esmé, persisted in sitting close beside me and telling me how fond she was of North Rode, and how she used to stay at the Vicarage in the old Vicar's time. On my other side, Mrs. Holt chimed in as a sort of echo. Esmé appeared to be more with Mrs. Holt than with her own people."

"I daresay they came together," said Quentin. "Mrs. Holt is fond of Esmé. She is a good deal at my uncle's."

"Well, finally, Mr. Crosier took her away to look at an assegai, or antbear, or something of that sort. Then my last state was worse than my first, for I fell into Mrs. Holt's clutches without hope of rescue.

What a depressing woman she is! I hope I do not hurt your feelings, Mr. Fleming? She is not a relative of yours, I believe."

"Oh, no. None whatever. Mrs. Holt is simply my uncle's sister-in-law, his late wife's sister."

"So I understood. Well, every time I have met her she has impressed upon me her desire to depart to another and better world; yet from all I have seen of her I am convinced she would feel horridly uncomfortable in any other country, to say nothing of another world."

"Ah," said Aveland, who had just finished a three-cornered discussion with McKie and the Vicar, "Mrs. Holt is a wise woman. To be happy one must either be intensely moral or entirely without morals. Either extreme brings peace. Mrs. Holt has attained to the first-mentioned Nirvana."

Paton looked grave.

"Mrs. Holt is an excellent woman," said he.

"Precisely. And nothing else. Are my observations too riotous for you, Paton? If so, I apologise. We will have some more music. It is supposed to be soothing. I have always felt it exactly the reverse."

"Do you mean you dislike it?"

"No. Quite the contrary. My complaint is that it brings too vividly before one the eternal unrest and disappointment of life. You may soar on 'Song's bright pinions,' and you do. But you come back to earth with a thud that leaves your bones aching. The human voice is no anodyne, Paton. It may be heaven. It more often is hell. But it is never sleep. Fleming was singing a fine Russian thing before you came in. Perhaps he will repeat it."

It was a melody of the steppes, a love-song, wherein the lover's words are ever and anon swept from his lips by the icy wind as the sleigh rushes over the frozen snow beneath the stars. Fleming sang the song well, as though feeling the exhilaration of the swift rush through the keen wind, the holding in of the tearing horses, the wild loneliness of the desolate plain, the intoxicating companionship of the muffled figure beside him.

"Ye sing it like some auld Viking on the edge of a fight," said McKie, approvingly, as the last chords were struck. "I can hear the whicker o' the sword through the notes. It is just amazing how love-making and fighting go together. The one always reminds of the other."

"Very good—very," observed the Vicar, placidly. "Now-a-days there is a great demand for these—er—folk-songs. They are certainly impressive."

"Because they are elemental," said Aveland. "No music appeals so powerfully to mankind as the ballads wherein the mighty trinity—Love, Life, and Death—call to the world to listen."

"There are better ballads in Scotland," said McKie.

Quentin laughed.

"That's right, doctor. Stand up for the North."

Frances took up her violin.

"I will not ask you to sing, Nina. I know your ideas of entertainment are Oriental."

"They are," assented Mrs. Paton. "I always sympathize with that Rajah who asked the cricketers why they did not hire somebody to do the running. I am very grateful to anyone who will do the running. What are you going to play?"

"Anything you like.'

"Why not these Hungarian Dances?" suggested Quentin, turning over a pile of music. "They remind me a little of those Slavonic things Sarasate played that day we heard him. Do you remember?"

"As if I could forget what Sarasate played! Yes, I remember. The notes flew out like sparks. He is a magician; he is the Pied Piper. We heard him twice, Nina."

"Did you all three go? I wish I had been with you."

"I only ran up to town in time for the last concert," said Quentin.

The Vicar looked mildly surprised.

"I thought, Miss Aveland, that you did not care for concerts."

"Quite right, Mr. Paton, I do not. I agree with the gipsies, who believe music should only be heard out of doors. But when the Pied Piper plays, one would thankfully listen to him in a coal-cellar, or at a greater depth. I have no doubt he would play Cerberus asleep, and 'that grim Ferryman whom poets speak of' would row him across without demanding the customary obolus."

Paton turned to his wife.

"We must really hear this violinist the next time we are in town, Nina."

"Yes, dear," Nina responded, with unusual meekness. She did not dare to confess that when they had last gone up to London, she had excused herself from accompanying her husband to a dismal entertainment at the house of a relative, hastening, instead, to dream under the spell of the enchanter for two brief hours.

"Frances and I managed to time our stay so that we heard him twice," observed Aveland. "My remarks as to the disturbing influence of music do not apply to his, which is infinitely soothing in its magic; but then, it is not the human voice. It is a sound of wood and air, of the wind in the forest, of singing pines and rustling grass, and, as Frances says, it leads to Fairyland. Did you ever notice, Paton, those singular verses of the ballad of Thomas the Rhymer, in which the way to Elfland is described? Three paths are pointed out: that of Righteousness, beset with thorns; that of Evil, running broad and smooth across a lilied lea; and that to Fairyland, over a ferny brae, the only one which is wholly pleasant both in the treading and the end of the journey. There is a deal in that old ballad, Paton. The deepest peace is found on that fairy route, along that ferny brae. No, do not speak of the narrow path. Its end, doubtless, is peace, but the thorns are sharp and rankle. There are no thorns on the ferny brae, and the sun is always shining. There are Pan and the Dryads. There stands Nausicaa, and Argus finds his master. And the Douglas comes to life again on Otterburn. Believe me, Paton, this world will never be anything but a modified Hell, and is only supportable because that Fairyland exists; a fair and gracious realm into which one may escape at any moment and find rest."

The Vicar was a cultivated man, an educated man in the olden sense of the word. Therefore, when culture appealed to him, he responded like a harp-string when another is struck close by.

"You echo Marlow," he said, and quoted the lines:

"'Have I not made blind Homer sing to me?
And hath not he that built the walls of Thebes
With ravishing sound of his melodious harp,
Made music with my Mephistopheles?
Why should I die then? Basely why despair?'"

"That is verra grand, and ye say it weel," said McKie, forgetting his dislike of the Vicar in his admiration of the dead giant whose words Paton quoted. Nay, he even felt some slight warming of heart towards the man who spoke Marlow's lines with such evident appreciation.

"Mind is the ruling power now-a-days," said Paton. His wife did not agree.

"Ah, no, Cyril. People may talk as they please about the supremacy of mind over matter, but so long as mind cannot get rid of matter, it seems to me that matter has generally the best of it. To be really a king, one must either be a supreme genius, ruling men centuries after death by sheer force of individuality, or else an Eastern monarch. Ruling hearts, indeed! Pooh!—what is that compared to the power of cutting off a man's head at a minute's notice? He may change his opinions a dozen times a day, but he cannot put his own head back again. Where, then, is your supremacy of mind?"

"Even then, Nina, you would not be ruling the man's sentiments," said Frances.

"No, but I should have deprived him of the power of expressing them," replied Nina.

"He might rise up and express them hereafter, with comments upon the manner of his muzzling here," Aveland suggested.

"Ah, that undiscovered country! How it checks

one at every turn. The Borgias were the only absolutely free men of modern times. In Alexander and Cæsar one beholds unshackled highly-cultivated human nature; minds unprejudiced, unbiassed, appreciative, perfectly untrammelled. How beautiful the sight!"

"They were monsters," said Paton. "Let us be thankful we shall not see their like again."

"Shall we not?"—it was Aveland who spoke. "I am not so sure. The conditions of our civilization are becoming favourable to the development of the type. But when Cæsar Borgia reappears, he will not belong to your profession, my dear Paton, but to mine."

"I am glad of that," replied the Vicar, with some emphasis, and they all laughed. Then the fantastic sparkling Hungarian melodies leapt out from Frances' violin. When they ceased, more songs followed, McKie petitioning for Mary Stuart's Lament.

"That is pairfect," he said with a sigh as the notes ceased. Whether he had been listening to the voice then singing it, or to voices that had sung it long ago, who can tell? Ghosts gather thickly in the pathway as the years roll on.

"It is perfect," Nina agreed. "Cyril, I am afraid it is getting late."

"Not yet," said Aveland. "It is not much past eleven."

"Ma certes!" ejaculated McKie. "Quentin, I'll never catch that twelve train at Wildersmoor. I'd better take the train here instead of driving with ye."

"Oh, I'll get you there in time. If we miss it, I'll

put you up at the Hall. Mrs. Paton, I will drive you and the Vicar home, if you will permit me."

"It is too good of you, Mr. Fleming. I should be truly thankful. But shall we not cause Dr. McKie to miss his train?"

But McKie had become reckless.

"Never mind me, Mrs. Paton. I'll be snug enough at the Hall."

"We will take care of him if you forget to call for him on your way back," said Frances.

"Ye can forget me, Quentin," McKie called promptly after Fleming, as he went out laughingly replying that he was not very likely to forget to call at Sandhayes.

Nina had not much chance of conversing with Quentin as she sat beside him in the dog-cart, for the rain was now falling in quiet steady sheets, and her mind was chiefly occupied with keeping her umbrella well over herself, Fleming having refused any portion of it, saying he was as accustomed to a wetting as a sea-gull.

"This weather is positively awful," she exclaimed, as they rattled up the silent village street and the rain took a fresh innings and poured down more pitilessly than ever.

"Capital for the land," said Quentin, with a landowner's instinct. "I hope you are not getting very wet, Mrs. Paton?"

"Not at all, thanks. I hear my husband asking your groom where he goes to church."

"Do you? I am afraid Smith does not go anywhere. The metropolitan splendours of Woffendale generally attract him on Sundays."

"Do you go there every day?"

"To Woffendale? Yes, but I get home early as a rule, generally to lunch. To-morrow I shall be dining with my uncle. Here we are. Let me help you down."

CHAPTER XI

MRS. PATON drew off her gloves slowly and thoughtfully as she stood before the fire in the Vicarage drawing-room, while the sound of the retreating dog-cart died away.

"Extremely lucky for us that Fleming happened to be at Sandhayes," observed her husband, warming his hands. "By the way, you were rather uncharitable in the way you spoke of the Rusholmes, and they are old friends of his."

"I assure you, Cyril, he did not mind in the least, and I wished to put before him the impression that odious girl Esmé makes upon a civilized individual like myself."

"She may simply desire to be more friendly with you."

"She simply desires to marry Quentin Fleming. She meant to marry Ralph, but he was killed. Now she is turning her attention to his cousin."

"Well," said Paton, with serene obtuseness, "she would make him a good wife."

"My dear Cyril! she would make him perfectly wretched. The man has a thousand aspirations with which Esmé Rusholme's diminutive soul and illiterate mind could never sympathize. He would sink into a morose disappointed creature. He is too good for that. She only wants the money and position he could give her."

"Surely the Rusholme girls will have money."

"Not wealth such as Esmé could obtain by marrying an exceptionally rich man like Quentin Fleming. He is even a better match now than he was, for no doubt old Mr. Fleming will leave him the money that would have been Ralph's. Altogether," continued Nina, "I am very deeply interested in the situation, and I wish you were too, Cyril."

The Vicar yawned.

"It is seldom wise, my dear, to concern ourselves with our neighbours' affairs, and I am not sure that Fleming would like it."

Nina laughed. This idea really amused her.

"Oh, Mr. Fleming and I never quarrel. He is not the sort of man one quarrels with. Besides, I do not intend to meddle. I shall merely invite Esmé here so that she may have every opportunity of marrying Travis Crosier. He admires her, and is admirably suited to her. If she marries him, she will do no harm. He is an amiable ordinary man who will ultimately drift into a secluded parsonage where Esmé can lecture the villagers, and perhaps even do some good. Villages are the proper spheres for women of that type. In stormy centres of life they usually act as wreckers."

"This is merely your imagination, Nina."

"No, I have no imagination, wish I had. Anyone can see that Quentin Fleming is in love with Frances, and no wonder."

"It may be as you say. She is an exceedingly beautiful girl. I could wish that her father were less easy-going, less imbued with these lax modern notions. It would be much to be regretted if Fleming were influ-

enced towards views such as Dr. McKie's, for instance."

Nina paused a moment before she replied,

"I am sure that both Dr. Aveland and Dr. McKie are sincerely religious men, Cyril. I do not see that they have any lax notions. What makes you think so?"

"I mean that I consider them both opposed to authority; self-opinionated, in fact."

"So were those old prophets who retired into the desert and thought for themselves, and——"

Here the Vicar interrupted.

"Nowadays every man imagines himself a prophet. If he can hardly spell his own name, he can at least kick the parson."

Under provocation—in this instance it was the lingering remembrance of McKie's provocation—Paton occasionally developed a lay freedom of speech and a swift hitting of the nail on the head, that made one's heart warm towards him. Nina looked at her husband with approving eyes. She liked him best in his lay moods.

"I am sure, dear, nobody at Sandhayes wishes to kick the parson. If Frances marries Mr. Fleming, as I hope she will, you will find him inclined to do more, not less, on the Church's behalf. When a man is happy, he is disposed to be generous, and Frances would not check him. She does not interfere in anything unless she has some serious reason for so doing. Besides, she and I have always been good friends. Whereas Esmé Rusholme would take good care that not a moment of Mr. Fleming's time, or a penny of his money was bestowed upon anything that she did

not superintend, or upon anybody who did not defer to her in all things. She has the soul of a petty tyrant, cringing when down, insupportable when up. It would be quite a misfortune for us if she were Mrs. Fleming. There are a thousand ways in which she could make things disagreeable for us in Woffendale, and I am positive she would. She is civil to me now because she wishes to visit North Rode and hopes I shall invite her, which I shall, though not for her reason. But she is one of those women who dislike other women, and who let them know it if ever they get the upper hand."

The Vicar shook his head. He did not agree with his wife's opinion of Esmé Rusholme, which he ascribed to prejudice. But when Nina spoke of the friendship between herself and Frances, and of the antagonism between herself and Esmé, then he did listen to his wife's remarks. Hitherto he had not paid much attention to the friendly feeling existing between Nina and Sandhayes. Now it began to assume importance. If Nina could agree with Frances Aveland, and was resolved not to agree with Esmé Rusholme—the Vicar professed utter disbelief in natural aversions, though he himself had as many as an average Christian could comfortably manage—why, under these circumstances it would be obviously better that Mrs. Fleming's name should be Aveland rather than Rusholme. Possibilities began to dawn on Paton's mind. His brow cleared as he reflected that Nina would probably have more influence over Frances when the latter's father was dead; and possibly that unpleasant North Briton, McKie, might not be so perpetually at the Hall when its master was married. It is but just to the Vicar to

state that his anxiety to keep Fleming in the steady church-going habits of his forbears was not wholly for any advantage to himself. He depended upon Quentin's co-operation for the carrying out of several excellent schemes in the parish. Also, he hoped for more work in the future. There was little to do among the quiet fisher-folk of North Rode and the neighbouring farmers. There was much to do in noisy smoky Woffendale. If Paton could not comprehend and sympathize with those whose views differed from his own, that is a defect common to most people; he had at least the merit of being thoroughly in earnest and devoted to his work. It was but natural that he should picture himself—backed by Quentin Fleming—transferred to a Woffendale living, becoming better known, well spoken of by those whose speech is considered by their fellows, till—well, Cyril Paton rarely acknowledged his ambitions even to himself, but why should not a man hope for the prizes in his profession? Why is a parson expected to scorn all advancement for himself? If he really does so, he becomes an enthusiast, and is a burning and a shining light, or a Will-o'-the-wisp, as the case may be. There was no enthusiasm about the Vicar of North Rode; but he possessed a certain pig-headed goodness that won him respect, and a settled conviction of his own wisdom that would prove extremely serviceable to him when he reached the episcopal dignity.

"You say Crosier admires Esmé Rusholme," said Paton, after some minutes' silence. "Well, her money would be a help to him. She is sure to have some. It is growing late, my dear. Is the house shut up?"

So Nina knew that her words had made an impres-

sion. She was right in her judgment of Esmé Rusholme. For Esmé was dangerous by reason of her narrow sympathies, her small vindictive soul. Happily Providence had not bestowed upon her much mental capacity, therefore she was less harmful than she might have been. Yet no evil thing, however stupid, is powerless for evil. Many years, much labour, strong thought and deep feeling, go to the building of one cathedral. And the biggest fool upon earth can put a torch to it.

Sandhayes was the centre of several people's thoughts that night.

"Quentin," said McKie, as the dog-cart turned into a wide moorland track, whitish grey through the darkness and sweeping rain, and the lights of the old farmhouse disappeared from sight, "Quentin, Aveland is fairly cheerful, but he'll no last long. That's a bonny lass for a father to leave alone in the world. Mercy on us!" as a small rivulet dashed down the nape of his neck, "I'm thinking I'll accept your offer, lad, and stay at the Hall to-night. I'm in no mind for a railway journey after this."

"All right, doctor. How about your patients? Nobody will know where you are."

"I am a clever man, Quentin, so they'll do verra well without me. Haven't ye heard that there is a great difference between a good and a bad doctor, but verra little between a good doctor and none at all?"

Quentin laughed.

"And where is your big doggie?" continued McKie. "It's an ill night for the poor beastie to be running ahint."

"He's tucked up on the back seat with Smith. I

thought he might be tumbling into a moor-pool if I let him run in all this."

"That's weel. I was about to counsel ye to leave him at Sandhayes."

They drove on through the storm. Quentin's thoughts back in the ruddy-lighted room at Sandhayes, and the thoughts were fair and pleasant ones. None could regret Dr. Aveland's ill-health more than the son of his old friend. Fleming had a very great respect and personal liking for Frances' father independently of the fact that he was her father. But when a man has been ailing for a long time, his most intimate friends seldom realise the approach of the end. True, McKie's opinion was a valuable one. Yet he might be mistaken. Aveland might live some years longer. And Fleming had shadows of his own to face, grim phantoms that might at any time take form and shape worse than honourable death. So that when the reaction had taken place, and from gloom his spirits had risen to their former level, it was only natural that he should not pay much attention to McKie's melancholy prophecy. So he laughed as he drove on, thinking of happiness; and far off, on the hot dank West Coast, Jack Ulyett looked towards the north-west and saw and heard—not the dry dusty palms, the bare squalor, the monotonous maddening beating of the tom-toms—but the rime-laden quaintly-clipped yews at the gate of Sandhayes, the chill white blanket of the mist, the roll and swish of the strong cold Irish sea.

CHAPTER XII

ISABEL RUSHOLME had resolved upon speaking to her sister upon various matters. Accordingly, about the time that Fleming and McKie left Sandhayes, she knocked at her sister's door.

A half-impatient "come in" answered her. Esmé was sitting before the fire, pondering many things. For instance, whether it would not be possible to keep Travis Crosier a meek adorer until she had definitely captured Quentin Fleming, so that if Quentin did escape, there would still remain the curate.

Isabel drew a chair up to the other side of the fire, and sat down, putting her feet up on the fender, and surveying her sister with a scrutinizing air.

They were much alike: the same rippleless dark-brown hair, the same smooth complexion—not Frances Aveland's peach-like bloom, but an unchanging colouring that reminded one of the waxen rosiness of the prickly pear. Their heads were small, very small, too small to hold any brains; and, as usual with people possessing these heads, the Rusholme girls regarded their diminutive size as a beauty. For the rest, Isabel's grey eyes had an ordinary straightforward blankness, not Esmé's sinister sidelong glance; her nose was small, and her lips rather coarse; whereas her sister's mouth was a cruel slit, and her nose thin and aquiline. That which in Isabel was merely good-natured stu-

pidity became in Esmé a sort of low cunning, unperceived by many, but extremely repulsive to the few.

"Why have you come in?" Esmé inquired, after a minute's silence.

Isabel turned back the left cuff of her smart blue dressing-gown, looked with satisfaction at the diamond hoop sparkling on her third finger, and said,

"Well, you do not like advice, but I am going to offer you some, and you had better take it."

Esmé's gaze went back to the fire.

"Is it from George, or from Harry Haslam?" she asked, contemptuously. Her brother George and her sister's betrothed did not stand high in her opinion.

"From neither," said Isabel. "It is from myself. You have been going so often to see Mrs. Holt that I suppose you are thinking of marrying Quentin Fleming?"

She paused interrogatively.

"You have been discussing this with Harry Haslam," said Esmé, in ominous tones.

"No, I have not; though it would be only natural if I had."

"Mrs. Holt is my friend," pursued Esmé. "I go to see her. I do not desert my friends when they are in trouble."

"I came in to tell you," Isabel went on, "that if you are thinking of Quentin, you had better give up the idea, for Harry is quite certain he will marry Frances Aveland. He was at Sandhayes to-night."

"I know. Mrs. Paton told me. I shall go over to North Rode Vicarage presently—to call there, I mean."

Isabel stared hard at her sister, then at the fire.

"What is the good of that?" she asked. "You will not be invited to Sandhayes when Quentin is there; you may be sure of that. And if you were, you would not get on well there. You know you would not. Oh, yes," observing the expression of Esmé's face, "I know all you are going to say. But you scheme too much, Esmé. You would do better if you left some things to chance. You tried to prevent Harry and me becoming engaged—you know you did. Well, it was no use; we *are* engaged." Here Isabel took another survey of the diamond hoop, twisting it this way and that. "Anybody but Harry would be offended with you, only he is so good-tempered he does not mind anything now, and is quite ready to be a brother to you."

"I am much obliged to Mr. Haslam," Esmé interrupted.

"You need not be sarcastic," Isabel continued, with stolid serenity. "It will not make any difference one way or another. We shall soon be married, and you can do as you please when I have left home. I am telling you all this out of kindness. You are only wasting your time over Quentin. Harry is quite certain about Frances Aveland. Of course, it is a pity," judicially, "for I suppose he—Quentin, I mean—will have all Ralph's money as well as his own. But it cannot be helped. I daresay you could have married Ralph. Harry thinks so, though he says he considers you have had a blessed escape, for Ralph was very queer. There were all sorts of tales about him and Jack. He was a deal worse than Jack. They used to gamble, and he won a lot of money from him."

"Jack had none to lose," said Esmé, with contempt.

"Not much, but listen. Jack won it back just before he left, and Ralph would not pay, so Jack came to Woffendale to try to make him. You recollect Jack coming? It was that very evening that Ralph was murdered."

"I remember Jack coming in to say good-bye, and sneaking off before father got home."

"He did not sneak off—he never sneaks," said Isabel, indignantly. "You are always saying disagreeable things of Jack. He was in a hurry. Harry met him in the road, and Jack told him he had been to old Mr. Fleming's, and to the Works, and nobody knew where Ralph had gone. Harry says Jack seemed in an awful state of mind about the money, and he offered to lend him fifty pounds—Harry is so good-hearted. Jack thanked him, and said it was no good; he must have a clear thousand, or blow his brains out—his own brains," explained Isabel. "Then he asked if Quentin was at home at the Hall, but Harry did not know. Then Jack went off. Harry thinks he borrowed the money from Quentin."

"Quentin would not pay Ralph's gambling debts, I am sure."

"No, but he might lend it out of pity for Jack. I think he rather liked Jack. Harry believes," here Isabel lowered her voice, "that Jack was in such a fright about the money because he wanted to restore it before he sailed."

"Restore it?" repeated Esmé. "If he had won it back it was his own."

"Don't you see?" impatiently. "He had lost to Ralph and paid him. Then he won it back and Ralph would not pay: for spite, I suppose; or meanness. He

had plenty of money. Jack could not openly complain, because there would have been such a fuss about the gambling; which would not have mattered to Ralph, but would have ruined Jack. And he wanted the money back so badly because," here Isabel lowered her voice again, "it had never been his to lose to Ralph. He had taken it to play with."

"Do you mean he had stolen it from the firm?"

Isabel nodded.

"That is a nice thing for Harry Haslam to say of one of our family," observed Esmé, with cold anger.

"Harry is going to be one of our family, so I do not see why he should not talk about us. George, too, thinks there was something queer about the money, for where did Jack get it to pay Ralph, in the first instance?"

"I daresay he never paid Ralph at all. He would naturally want Ralph to pay him because he was always hard up."

Isabel reflected a moment or two. This was a new view of the situation, and one that might possibly be correct.

"Were the accounts all right at the Marstons'?" asked Esmé.

"Oh, yes, quite right. If Jack did help himself, he managed to put it all back again, with Quentin's help. Esmé, I think you are wrong. I believe he did take the money, for if not, why did he talk of blowing his brains out?"

"He was silly to say that. It arouses suspicion. I never liked Jack, and you see I was right. He never had any principles."

"Neither had Ralph, and yet you liked him, or seemed to," retorted Isabel. "But Ralph was rich, and so he could be as wicked as he pleased without getting into difficulties. I think it was horrid of him to win money from Jack when he knew Jack had only that wretched salary. And you should hear what George says about the way Ralph was living in Driffield!" and Isabel pursed up her lips.

"Jack got as much as he deserved."

"No, I don't think so, and I think father might have found him something to do in the mill. Then he could have come here in the evenings instead of getting into all sorts of scrapes. George asked father to do so, but he would not."

"I know," composedly. "I told mother to advise father against it, for you were continually talking about Jack, and he would not have been at all a desirable match for you."

Certainly there is something peculiarly irritating about persons of the type of Esmé Rusholme. Their calm assumption that you have thought this and that, have intended so and so, and need to be turned from these imaginary paths by petty underhand household scheming; all this obtuseness of perception and house-spider weaving of dirty webs, is at once intolerable and perfectly hopeless to contend with.

Isabel at first looked astonished, then angry.

"So all this is your doing, Esmé! All Jack's gambling, and his taking the money, if he did take it, and his going to that unhealthy place—all owing to your ridiculous ideas. As if I had ever thought of Jack!—and I am sure he never thought of me. How could you be so foolish? I hope this will be a warning to

you to give up all this planning. Look what you have done! Quentin Fleming knows all about Jack and that money, for, of course, Jack would have to confess everything to Quentin to get helped. How pleasant for us! How angry father would be if he knew that our cousin had gone begging to Wildersmoor for a thousand pounds to save him from prison or suicide. If you had let matters alone, he would have been working here in the mill, not going to Africa at all."

"His going was his own doing."

"Yes, in a way. He went because he could get nothing better in England. Father would have given him a fair salary if you had not interfered. Well, considering what your managing has led to, you had certainly better give up all idea of marrying Quentin. I should think he has had about enough of us. A thousand pounds is not sixpence, and, of course, he knows well enough that lending to Jack means giving. Besides, if anybody in this house attracted him, he would come. But he is not here more than once a month, and often not that. He is always at Sandhayes. I shall write Jack a long letter. He will be glad to hear all the news, and I think he has been badly used by your scheming and plotting. Goodnight."

And Isabel departed to her own room. She did write to Ulyett on the morrow, and being in the first flush of her indignation she told him, not only the news of her own engagement and other Woffendale events that she thought might interest him, but also a plain unvarnished tale of how Esmé had prevented Mr. Rusholme giving him employment in their own mill, and her reasons.

"Not that I believe it was really Esmé's reason, for, of course, dear Jack, she knew quite well that Harry and I understood each other, and you never thought of me. Perhaps it was just ill-nature. I send you a paper with the account of Ralph Fleming's death. It is a pity Esmé had not married him before he was murdered. She still goes constantly to old Mr. Fleming's, who is very much broken up. Harry says Quentin Fleming is always at Sandhayes. We suppose he is going to marry Frances Aveland. You had better burn this letter, because I am so cross with Esmé I don't know what I have said."

Which letter was perused by Ulyett with great attention and considerable amusement. He laughed as he folded it up. Then his face grew grave. He got up, stretching his arms, looked seaward through the dusty haze, and said softly,

"God bless them!"

But he did not mean his cousin Isabel and his friend Haslam.

That conversation between the Rusholme girls led to stranger results than either dreamt. For, months later, Esmé wrote Ulyett a letter which would have never been written had Isabel not come into her room that February night, and told her of things she did not know. She had not known of that visit of Ulyett's to Wildersmoor. After her sister had left her, she sat long brooding over it. To neither of them did it occur that Ulyett might be the stranger who crossed the moor with Blind John: they had not heard of his visit to Sandhayes. If he went to see Quentin, of course he would return by train to Woffendale from Wildersmoor.

Esmé pondered deeply over this news of Isabel's, coming at length to the conclusion that the story about the money was true. She also came to another conclusion, entirely erroneous, but natural to one like Esmé; for she had no belief in friendship that was not reasonable. Reasonable friendship meant to lend when you were sure of repayment, either in actual cash or services required. Had Ulyett only needed—say, a hundred; well, there would have been nothing astonishing in Quentin letting him have it. Jack could repay it out of his salary. But a thousand! When, if ever, would Jack be able to return a thousand? Therefore, argued Esmé, what induced Quentin Fleming, a good man of business, to do such a remarkably unbusinesslike thing as to lend a thousand pounds to worthless Jack Ulyett? What motive had he for thus befriending a man so useless; a man with no connections save the Rusholmes, who kept him at arm's length, speaking of him as "poor Jack"—a man who would never do anything but sink more and more—a man who drifted naturally towards the depths; why had Quentin done this thing? Esmé answered the question herself and smiled as she did so, for Jack would be another weapon in her hand if need be; Jack with his knowledge of what happened that foggy night on Wildersmoor. Quentin had bought his silence. Of this Esmé felt sure; and he must buy hers—at a higher price. How fate was playing into her hands! Esmé did not say Fate. She said Providence. Esmé was always on the best of terms with Providence—or she thought so. She meant to marry Quentin for his money and position, but she did not put it that way to herself. She would

marry him to save him from the consequences of his sin, both here and hereafter. What motive could be higher? Had her profane cousin Jack been able to see Esmé's careful arrangement of her own mind, he would promptly have offered himself as a more fitting subject for such devotion, his sins being numerous and varied; thus affording scope for different treatment of each, and a greater anxiety as to his final destination. But then Ulyett was a scoffer. Of all men, Esmé disliked her cousin most. He had a trick of reading her thoughts, of seeing through her artifices, that had determined her to keep him as much out of Woffendale as possible. Hence chiefly her successful opposition to her brother's proposal to have him in the mill. Now he should be useful to her. He was in her power. She could make him do as she pleased; use him, if necessary, as a lever to compel Quentin to her will.

Were they not both in her power? She smiled again as she thought this. Ulyett fancied himself safe. He had restored the money and knew that Fleming would not betray him. Whatever George Rusholme and Harry Haslam might guess, they would not speak: George, because Jack was his cousin; Harry, because he was engaged to marry Isabel. And Fleming fancied himself safe. Ulyett would be silent. He had every possible reason for being silent. The two would keep each other's secrets well. It was their mutual interest so to do. But she, Esmé, knew all—all, and her silence should only be purchased by marriage. Once Quentin understood that, he would not be very likely to risk the grim alternative. If he showed any hesitation—denied the secret she had guessed, why, there was Jack to bring forward—Jack who knew and

who could be coerced into taking her part by her knowledge of the stolen money.

Of course, Esmé reflected, it would be optional with Quentin to threaten Jack as she did, but it was hardly probable that he would do so. To ruin Jack would not save himself if she—Esmé—chose to speak. No, Jack was safe enough from Fleming, and she could make him her accomplice. In short both men were in her power, and she meant to use that power. That Quentin might possibly feel resentment at his future being thus arranged by others did not trouble Esmé in the least. Once married to him, things would go smoothly. She knew him well enough to be sure that he would not visit his resentment upon her, and for his feelings she cared nothing. That such coercion—if it succeeded—would be likely to affect Quentin's character injuriously by sapping his self-respect and disappointing all his hopes, simply never occurred to her. Nor would she have believed this had anyone pointed it out. To Esmé, things not tangible were non-existent. She was born a scientist; unscrupulous, and blind by reason of that unscrupulousness.

CHAPTER XIII

ALL that night the rain swept from westward. Towards morning the gale subsided, and a thick warm mist brooded over the land till the sun rose. Then the mist rose too, gathering—curling—floating away; catching here and there in the willows—lingering above the pools—melting into the hazy gold of the February sunshine.

It was one of those sudden atmospheric changes not uncommon on the western coast. A rapid thaw, a storm of rain, a quick rise of temperature, and the air is like moist warm velvet; one positively notices the velvety texture as one breathes. It is scented too—this moist warm velvet; scents of moss and peat and fern pressed out by the sea-mists—fumes of earth and sea that exhilarate as they mount to the brain. One breathes the very substance of the earth—nay, one *is* the earth; a handful of chemicals in the hand of the Creator, "and, lo! from the clod a spirit rises;" from moss and peat, from sea and sky—one lives and moves and has one's being.

Fleming did not go to Woffendale that morning. He wished to see one or two of his tenants on the outlying farms, and who on such a day would walk on stony pavement and listen to rattle of machinery when he could ride over miles of turf and hear the plover's whistle and the rush of the tide? McKie,

who had remained the night at the Hall, bemoaned himself as Quentin saw him off at Wildersmoor station.

"It's mornings like this that make a man feel the hardships of civilization. What wad I not give to be just a barelegged Hieland cateran breasting Ben Nevis!"

But he declined Fleming's invitation to stay and try whether the moor would not do as a substitute for Ben Nevis.

"I'll no deny that maist o' the sick folk wad do just as weel without me, but it wadna pay to let 'em find it out," he observed as he clambered into a third-class carriage; McKie never wasted siller on luxurious travelling. And Quentin, left alone, rode northward across the moor.

To be in sound health, on a good horse, riding over Wildersmoor on a fine spring morning, is to experience a riotous delight in mere existence. "We need pray for no higher heaven than the pure senses can furnish," says Thoreau; and seeing that Christianity is a belief in the resurrection of the body, there is much to be said for this view. It is the soul of a churl that will not thank God when its earthly garment respires in an atmosphere that suits it, for then simply to go on breathing is a foretaste of Paradise—a return to the wild exhilaration of the Morning of the world, when the Sons of God shouted for joy.

By the time Quentin had reached the first farm he had forgotten all shadows, both that which pursued and that which might meet him. The shadow that pursued? his horse's hoofs beating on the soft mossy turf had left it far behind, lingering by the spot where

the blind had found the dead. The shadow—a yet grimmer phantom this—that might meet him, it had vanished, melted into the blue distance. The year was at the spring; and so was Quentin's spirit.

The second farm he visited lay westward, towards North Rode. He meant to ride on to Sandhayes presently. In the country one calls on one's friends at any hour that may chance to be convenient. No need to wait till afternoon before one can knock at a familiar door. The time was barely eleven, he would be there by twelve, thought Fleming, as he drew rein at the farm gate, where the farmer stood talking to a labourer.

Farmer Blackshaw greeted his landlord after the fashion of Surturbrand—as a free Dane his leader; and proceeded to explain the contention between the man and himself.

"Would yo' believe it?" he said, appealing to Quentin as sure of sympathy. "I sent this chap o'er to Woffendale wi' a cartload o' this an' that, an' a few sacks o' potatoes, an' he's lossen a sack on th' road. Lossen a sack o' potatoes an' conna tell wheer it fell off nor owt about it!"

"Ay, thot's it. I conna tell owt," acquiesced the culprit; not sulkily nor carelessly, but simply as stating a fact.

Fleming was amused.

"When did you first miss the sack?"

"Eh, sir, not till I wur i' Woffendale market. Then I looked i' th' cart an' th' sack wur gone!"

The farmer eyed his man half-humorously.

"Lad, art tha in love?"

"Nay, I amna," with a sheepish grin.

"Then," said Blackshaw, impressively, "tha mun be a fool!"

Quentin laughed consumedly. In his light-hearted frame of mind the situation appealed to him. He sympathized fully with the farmer's standpoint of thought. A man in love may reasonably be excused even such an error as losing a sack of potatoes; the distracting nature of his meditations pleads for him. But when he cannot urge this excuse, what then is to be said for him? Clearly he is a fool.

Neither did the potato-loser by any means resent the epithet, but, perceiving its reasonableness, joined in with an appreciative guffaw, and advanced to hold Fleming's horse.

"Oh, never mind! He will follow me," said the latter, dismounting. "I see you are ploughing up there, Blackshaw. You lose no time," glancing towards a near sweep of upland where, dark against the hazy blue of the sky, plough, ploughman, and horses paused a moment at the end of a furrow.

"Oh, ay, it's no good to stond an' whistle, an' theer couldna be a better day for turning o'er the ground. I wur going up theer. Will you coom, too, sir? You was a rare one for ploughing when you was a boy."

"I believe I could drive a tolerably straight furrow now," said Quentin, as he and Blackshaw walked up the narrow path, Fleming's horse following close behind its master like a dog.

There is a singular fascination in this February ploughing: to lean against the old weather-beaten stile and watch the slow, heavy tread of the intelligent brutes as they pace onward; the hiss and gleam of the steel cleaving the earth as a prow the sea; the waves

of rich brown earth rising—falling over as the plough passes on, steadied by the labourer, his slow step like that of the Clydesdale, his whole bearing—the slight backward poise of the body as his hard hands grasp the handles—having a sort of clumsy grace, the beauty of perfect harmony.

There is about it all an idea of a good beginning, a sturdy, wholesome foundation for life to come. The horses are strong; the man is strong; the plough is good steel made by strong arms; underneath are the slow waves of the strong clean earth; birds twitter joyfully in the furrows; in the leafless trees the sap is rushing bravely upward; the clear pale February sky is overhead; the chill sweetness of the February air all round—a good beginning of bread for the life of man. One pauses by the stile and lazily wonders what noble thoughts, what saintly lives yonder brown field will feed. Truly, it may feed thoughts and lives neither noble nor saintly; but, somehow, one does not think of that as the long furrow is driven and turned. The spell woven by the February ploughing is the spell of contentment. All is well—all must be well; since as long as the earth remaineth, seed-time and harvest shall not cease.

Fleming and Blackshaw talked of barns and silos, and watched the rising and falling waves of soft brown earth. The ploughman was a black-haired, strongly-built young fellow, who had often helped Quentin to drive a furrow when it had pleased the young master in his boyhood to try his hand at ploughing—both lads hanging on to the plough-handles, a handle each. He now halted and pointed out the off horse to Quentin.

"Owd Jenny, sir. You mind her?"

"Of course I do," patting the creature, who turned large soft eyes upon him. "I remember how she used to look round reproachfully at us when we could not hold the plough steady."

Farmer Blackshaw chuckled.

"I reckon Jenny could ha' driven a straighter furrow than either o' you i' those days."

"I have not a doubt about it. Well, Blackshaw, I'll see about those silos."

The field was wide and sloping, with a footpath down the middle. The lower end of the path opened directly on the moor; the upper led through more fields, and thence into a moorland track leading to North Rode. Blackshaw was expressing his thanks, the plough had turned the furrow, and Quentin was re-mounting, when he caught sight of a figure he knew well standing by the far gate; the cinnamon-brown of her garments so blending with the russet tones of the leafless hedge that, till now, he had not seen her.

"Is that gate locked?" he asked, withdrawing his foot from the stirrup.

"No, sir. You can get through on to th' moor."

Frances held out her hand with a smile as Quentin approached.

"Have you been discussing farming? I saw you and Marigold when you first came up," stroking the horse's velvet muzzle. The creature was following close behind Fleming's shoulder, stepping daintily along the narrow path.

"Did you! I only caught a glimpse of you a moment ago. Your dress is the same colour as the brambles."

"I have been watching the ploughing and trying to find out why the clank of the slackened chain, as the plough turns and is lifted, is so pleasing to one's ears. It is an idyllic sound. When a railway porter uncouples carriages I do not find the clanking by any means idyllic, though it is the same. Yet there are people who maintain that fact is everything."

"Facts are just what feelings make them; no more —no less," said Quentin. "Nothing is real but ourselves. And everything is beautiful in spring."

Frances glanced at her old playmate and laughed.

"Are not these sentiments of yours similar to those which drew on you Dr. McKie's reproof last night?"

"Dear old boy!—it is not often that I shock him. I am right, though. What causes happiness is good. The sound of ploughing in spring makes us happy. Therefore it is good."

His companion laughed again.

"It is good. But not, I think, for the reason you have given."

"Well, since it is good, what matters the reason? Any reason will do."

The spring was running in Fleming's veins even as in the brown tree-trunks. He was bubbling over with life; his eyes dark and luminous—very little of the grey iris visible; eyes and lips smiling together, his step buoyant. He seemed to radiate vitality—the strong sunny vitality of the awakening earth. This was Quentin as Frances had always known him—Quentin with no shadow on his face: joyous, untroubled, restful. Her own spirits rose under the exhilarating influence of his presence. This, indeed, was the secret of his popularity. People were the happier

for seeing him. The light-hearted unspoken warmth of sympathy cheered them. For the moment their life-burdens pressed less heavily. Hitherto life had gone smoothly with Frances Aveland. She scarcely remembered her mother's death. No sorrow had touched her till the dark shadow of her father's illness loomed before her, an illness with no hope of recovery—a slow wasting. That shadow dimmed the future. When she was alone—it seemed impossible that she should ever be alone; go in and out, do this and that in the silence of solitude, with none to heed or care. Perhaps one more careless would have pondered less and so been happier. But Frances, like her father, was of a grave reflective disposition. She was impelled by nature to look forward, to wonder what was behind the mists of to-morrow.

Through those mists, it is true, the face of her old playmate Quentin often appeared. Yet all was uncertain. Who could tell what might happen? Nina was mistaken as regarded Esmé Rusholme; but Frances knew, though she would not acknowledge it even to herself, that if by any strange chance Esmé married Quentin, she—Frances Aveland—would probably not remain very long at Sandhayes. For with her father dead, with the Patons possibly removed to a better living, with Wildersmoor Hall closed to her, what would be left to her save the old farmhouse full of memories of happier days?

As regards all this, however, she would not look too closely into her own soul. Too keen scrutiny of oneself is not always wise, and, moreover, not natural to Frances Aveland. Reflective she was, but not introspective. That belongs to shallower natures.

"Why think so much?" continued Quentin, with shining eyes, as they walked on through the fields, Marigold stepping gently behind them.

"Because there is so much to think about," she responded. "I am like Hokusai—I wish to get at the bottom of things."

"Hokusai, if I remember rightly, did not expect to get to the bottom of things till he was ninety. Wherefore this haste?"

"Hokusai," said Frances, "died at eighty-nine, so he never got to the bottom of things. Missed it by a year. Perhaps if he had hurried he might have succeeded. I regard his fate as a warning."

"And suppose you succeeded?—what then?"

"Go on to the bottom of more things."

"Oh, there is no time. And if there were it is not worth the time. The Lincolnshire fellow was right; happiness is everything—nothing matters so long as you're happy. To know all things would not make the sunshine brighter, the sky bluer, or the song of the birds sweeter. By the way, they are not singing now, but quarrelling frightfully. I can tell by the sound of their twittering."

"The quarrelling sounds very pretty. I admit that the sunshine would not be brighter nor the sky bluer, but the more one knows the more clearly one perceives the brightness and the blueness."

"You believe that knowledge increases happiness?"

"I am sure that the more women know the happier they are. I cannot speak for men."

"Well, I give it up. Doubtless you are right. But there are times when there seems nothing better than to revert to the original monkey and bask in the sun."

"It appears to me," observed Frances, reflectively, "that men are perpetually wailing to revert to the original monkey. The monkey itself would know better. It would not desire to revert to the original jelly-fish. You possess the treasures of the past ages, all that which only I call knowledge; and yet you cry to sit in a cave and eat raw mammoth! You have the Pillar of Fire and the Pillar of Cloud; yet you grumble at the desert and sigh for the whips of Egypt."

"The desert is really very rough walking now and then. I wish to linger in the oases. That is all. For instance, here is a pleasant oasis—this sunny morning. Let us enjoy it to the utmost and forget there are any other mornings."

"Yes, it is a pleasant oasis," Frances looked round as she spoke.

There was "a good gigantic smile o'er the brown old earth;" perhaps the little puffs of warm air from the sea were whispering jokes over the tattered brambles and withered fern. Rabbits scuttled gaily about; birds flew, and chirped, and wrangled excitedly; a cloudlet of battered gnats rose and fell by the hedge; through the clear air came the now distant rattle of the plough-chain; close at her ear the soft tread of Quentin's horse, keeping close behind his master; Quentin himself beside her—truly it is wisest to enjoy the present; who can tell what the mists of to-morrow may conceal? Her forebodings of the future returned. This spring might be her father's last—might also be her last on Wildersmoor.

"Well?" said her companion, inquiringly.

"You are right," resolutely turning her thoughts from that chill future. "And yet I think I am right too."

"Let us say we are both right. That is a conclusion equally cheerful and correct. We shall tramp over the desert stones all the better for our rest. Also, it may be the vocation of some to live always in a green and shady oasis; tending the palms and keeping the water sweet for the wayfarer. Now that is really a brilliant idea of mine."

"It may be so," she responded, thoughtfully, "but the wayfarers are the most to be honoured."

"They are. Like the Martyrs. Yet the pity of it! I am no believer in the beauty of ugly things. The world is no better because somebody has a toothache. The toothache ought not to exist. In pursuance of which theory, I would sweep out of existence every man who deliberately causes pain to any living thing. He is increasing the sum of the world's misery. It is sheer nonsense to talk of the ennobling effect of misery in any form. Evil it is and evil it must remain. The Church did not live because the Martyrs died, but because what they believed was true. The best men and women have often suffered poverty and wretchedness, but their sufferings did not make them noble; they were noble before that. Their sufferings were simply the outcome of the wrong-doing of others, either directly or indirectly, and were evil both in origin and results; as all suffering is. I always protest against its being considered beautiful, as I am sure that leads to a sort of tacit approval of evil; people forget how the misery has arisen. For instance, when I was about sixteen, there was a great fuss in North Rode over the compassion shown by a village child to a dog that she had found lying by the roadside with two legs broken and one eye knocked out. She had

carried it home, and a travelling bone-setter—by way of ingratiating himself with the people—had bound up the creature's hurts. Everybody said 'How charming!' When I heard of it, I said, 'Who damaged the dog?' Nobody knew. Nobody had thought of inquiring. The compassion of the child was pretty, but the cause was ugly, so that had remained in oblivion. But I sought and discovered the original cause in the village bully—a lad of my own age—and I administered to him the worst thrashing he ever had, with a promise of two more if I ever caught him damaging any more animals. I intended doubling the punishment each time—a wholesome study in arithmetic. However, he went to sea not long after and was drowned in a storm by a happy mistake of Providence."

"Why 'mistake'?"

"Well, I observe that Providence—or something else—usually preserves the worthless."

Frances turned on him eyes full of smiling amusement.

"Did you not reprove me a few moments ago for desiring to get to the bottom of things? It seems to me you are as much in earnest about it as I, and more practical."

"Did I not confess that you were right?" he replied, laughing too. "I only pleaded for a little rest now and then."

For a few moments they walked on in silence, that contented silence which is the surest test of companionship. The fields were behind them; the moorland track sloping westward before them to where the windows of the North Rode cottages glittered in the sun,

and the little wood that sheltered Sandhayes stood out darkly against the pale sands and shining sea.

"I intended to speak to you yesterday, about a scheme of Mr. Paton's, but I quite forgot," said Frances, presently. "I think I will mention it now lest he should get hold of you first."

"Poor Paton! You know you are hard upon him."

"No, I am not," she protested. "I really like him very much. I am so grateful to him for marrying Nina and bringing her here to North Rode. I only wish to expand his ideas a little, they are very good ideas."

"And this particular idea?"

"Is a village library. He wants you to let him have rent free that empty cottage by the forge. He believes he can raise enough money by subscription to buy books and pay a caretaker."

"And what am I to do?" asked Quentin, as she paused. "Do you wish me to shake my head over the cottage?—or present it to him ready furnished?"

"How meek you are! All that depends, of course, on your own opinion of the scheme. But my objection is that no provision is made for women. That is generally so. Everything is done to save men, and provide them with reasonable amusement, but nothing for women. Then they are blamed when they spend their time in gossiping, or quarrelling, or devouring penny dreadfuls of the most ludicrous kind. Here the girls bring home low-class weekly papers—whole bundles of them—from Woffendale, and they and their elders hang over them entranced. Now that cottage has three rooms on the ground floor, which would give two reading-rooms, one for women. I do not think a common reading-room would be liked in such a primi-

tive place as this. Of course, the women's room will never be used so much as the men's, because it is seldom possible for a woman to leave her house for hours. But the mere fact of the room being there would lead them to borrow books to read at home. We, father and I, will give some books if there is a women's room; not unless. Nina will tell Mr. Paton so, but it occurred to me that the matter was entirely in your hands. The cottage is needed, so if you make a Women's Reading Room a condition—why, it is done."

"I will do so. Anything else?"

Frances laughed.

"Not at present, thank you."

"May I leave Marigold at Sandhayes while I superintend the cleaning of old Will's cottage."

"I am surprised you think it necessary to ask. Poor old Will!—I have put up a basket with tobacco and a few other things to console him."

"You promised to come and look on."

"And I am coming, as soon as father is ready. He is writing letters."

"Oh, then I will not disturb him. I will take Marigold round to the stables and go straight to the Vicarage, where I expect to find Paton ready with his myrmidons."

"How many myrmidons?"

"I don't know. I told him it would be as well to have several women, so that poor old Will's agony would not be prolonged. It will be a positive circus for the village."

It was.

CHAPTER XIV

WHEN, an hour later, Aveland and his daughter strolled up the one straggling street of the village, they found the whole population, including the dogs, clustered round Will Elliot's cottage. It was a little white-washed thatched dwelling, semi-detached, having two windows to the road, and the door at the side opening into a narrow slip of garden surrounded by a white paling, and divided by a path down the middle into flower and kitchen-garden. This slip of ground was well-kept; the flower half jewelled with crocuses, the prosaic portion having a goodly show of winter greens and a noble onion bed. Old Will's gardening afforded him both amusement and support. He had been a fisherman. Now, in his old age, his wife dead, his two sons drowned, he lived on his small savings, supplemented by the produce of his garden, and by gifts from kindly neighbours and "the better end;" *i. e.*, the gentry.

He was rather a picturesque figure as he sat in his armchair in the porch, eyeing his scattered lares and penates. For the furniture had been carried out of the cottage to facilitate cleaning, and was filling the garden path, and overflowing into the road—an amazing assortment of pots, and pans, and kettles, old fishing-nets, planks, torn sails that had weathered many a storm, rickety stools, pails fit for the Danaides, piles of rags that had afforded snug lodgings to generations

of mice; in short, the accumulations of years, for the old man never threw anything away.

"It'll coom in handy," he would say; and, certainly, he contrived uses for much apparently useless rubbish. Did not two dilapidated pails, filled with scarlet geraniums, stand every summer one on each side of the porch, the holes in the pails affording efficient drainage, and the vivid flame of the flowers leading the eye away from their battered receptacles?

To a man of such resources, the compulsory overhauling of his household gods was sacrilege. Marius at Carthage could hardly have worn a more tragic aspect than Will Elliot that sunny morning, notwithstanding Fleming's sympathising presence, and the reassuring observations of Paton and the interested crowd.

"You will be much more comfortable, Elliot," urged the Vicar, cheerfully.

"Nay, I shanna."

"You will not know your own house," pursued Paton, still more cheerfully.

"Loike enow!" sardonically. "Here!" as a strong-armed woman came out, carrying a pail of dirty water, "wheer art tha taking that to, tha wasteful besom? Teem it to th' cabbages, dost tha hear? If tha mun be slopping soapsuds about, put 'em wheer they'll do some good."

"That is a brilliant idea, Will," and Quentin, taking the pail from the woman's hands, distributed its contents among the cabbages with great dexterity and impartiality. "Now, are there any more soap-suds?"

Another pail appeared, and was similarly disposed of, Elliot looking on with approval.

"I'm obliged to yo', Fleming," he said, addressing Quentin in Border fashion, without any prefix. "If hoo'd ha' done it, hoo'd ha' teemed it smack into th' cabbage hearts, loike as not."

The woman whose knowledge of cabbages was thus aspersed turned upon him.

"Thee ought to be ashamed o' thysen, Will Elliot, a-moithering th' gentry wi' thy soap-suds, an' thy floors, an' thy doments. An owd mon loike thee sitting up to thy ears i' rags an' muck, an saying as tha loikes it!"

"Capital woman!" said Paton, as she whisked back into the cottage. "Really enjoys cleaning."

Will cocked a resentful eye towards the Vicar.

"O' course hoo enjoys it, Mr. Paton," with a faint emphasis on the "Mr." that Paton did not understand. It meant the boundless scorn of a Borderer for a stranger and a Southron—a man so insignificant that he was compelled to tack on to his name a term of respect, the name itself not being sufficient. "O' course hoo enjoys it! Did yo' ever know a woman as didna enjoy turning a mon topsy-turvy? Just when he's set in the chimney-corner wi' his feet on th' hearth an' his pipe in's mouth, up comes a woman wi' a scrubbing-brush, an' it's 'Get out o' that,' hoo says!"

"And he gets out," said Quentin, laughing.

"Ay, to be sure, Fleming. What else should a mon do if he doesna want th' belfry dinging about his ears? Nobbut it's natural enow fur a woman to worrit wi' her own house, an' I never chunnered o'er my missis doing it. What I dunnot hold wi' is other folkses worriting, doctors sniffing an' bawling, parsons a-follerin' 'em loike little dogs, till a chap conna call his skin his

own! I wonder every decent mon doesna emigrate, an' leave 'em th' riff-raff as wouldna moind—riff-raff never moinds owt!"

At this point the Avelands came up, followed by a stable-boy carrying a well-filled basket designed for old Will's consolation. There is none quicker to discern any rare gift of mind or character than the Northerner. Thus it happened that Dr. Aveland, despite his southern birth, was a favourite with Elliot. The old Borderer inquired after Aveland's health with real solicitude, and then unbosomed himself regarding cleanliness generally.

"A-messing an' slopping," he said, "as if theer wurna water enow on Wildersmoor wi'out lugging it indoors! When th' Lord let th' flood loose He told Noah to build the ark so as to keep th' water out. If a mon built an ark i' these days, he'd ha' a round dozen o' doctors an' parsons a-smelling round a-telling him th' proper way to let th' water in. Eh, I shouldna fret if the flood coom again!"

"A good many people are of your opinion, Elliot."

"I dunnot doubt it. Here's th' parson talking o' laws fur folks to be clean; but ye know," significantly, "law's law just so long as ye let it be law."

"That is so." Aveland's slow smile rippled up into his sombre eyes. This last observation of Will's was one thoroughly after his own heart.

"Will ye sit, Aveland?" Will hospitably waved a hand towards a kitchen-chair, and the doctor sat down. "I wur about to say theer's a mort o' fools making laws fur their betters."

He paused and looked at Frances talking to Quentin by the gate. Elliot's natural delicacy forbade him

to utter the thought in his mind respecting the eminent suitability of a marriage between the two. He contented himself with observing that he was glad to see Miss Frances looking so bonnie.

Then Paton came forward and tried to impress old Will with the advantages of personal cleanliness. In vain.

"Ye know nowt about it, Mr. Paton. Eighty-six last birthday, I wur, an' look at me. I con see wi'out glasses, an' hear, an' have neither ache nor pain barrin' lumbago, an' never had. When ye come to be eighty-six I'll warrant yo'll not say as mooch. This waish-waishing 'll be th' ruin o' th' country. Th' chaps as fought th' French wi' Nelson didna waish. They knew better—ay, they did! See th' folks now-a-days! A poor nesh lot. They conna stond this, an' they conna stond that, an' they mun be molly-coddled loike new-born babbies. Ye mean well, parson, but ye hannot th' gift o' seeing."

"How about me, Will?" interposed Quentin. "Washing does not seem to have stunted my growth."

"You're a big chap, Fleming, an' strong. But yo'd ha' been bigger an' stronger if yo'd ha' kept more out o' th' tub. If th' Lord had meant folks to be allus splashing i' water He'd ha' created 'em mermaids."

"Well," said the Vicar, good-humouredly, "I will go and tell my mermaids to hurry. It is time you were back indoors."

Frances picked up a rug and put it round the old man's shoulders.

"The house will not look very different when all the things are put back," she said. "There is a good fire. Will you go in now?"

But Elliot preferred to stay outside till his household goods were carried within, lest any of them should be taken away as "rubbish." The fishing-nets, the old pails, the rusty anchor, the geranium cuttings in worn-out pans, the ends of rope and broken stools, all were duly carried back by Quentin and the Vicar, aided by the two char-women and the Avelands' stable-boy. Lastly, Frances arranged the contents of the Sandhayes' basket in the little cupboard by the fireplace, that served as the old man's pantry, and settled old Will himself comfortably in front of the fire. He was expressing his thanks for the "baccy;"—it would "help to take off th' smell o' th' soap," he said—when Nina walked in.

"I am sorry I am so late. I intended to have helped to put the cottage in order. However, here is my small contribution."

She unrolled a bundle which proved to be a warm hearthrug.

"This is for your feet, Will."

Elliot looked politely dubious.

"Thank ye kindly, Mrs. Paton, but I loike to speak my moind to th' Vicar, so I conna well take it, being his'n, yo' see."

"Oh, I consider this quite my own," she replied. "My godmother gave it to me when I was married. It is a little shabby now, and Mr. Paton does not like it, but it is still good and warm."

"It's a rare nice un, an' I'll be glad on it, an' thank ye," said Elliot, with an instant change of manner. The distinction between goods brought into the house by the wife, and those purchased by the husband was always clear to the mind of the northern peasant, though

he might choose to ignore it for his own convenience now and then.

The rug was Nina's, therefore Will could take it and yet preserve his independent attitude towards "th' parson." Though in truth the old man did not actively dislike Paton, he merely wished to enter a vigorous protest against the principle of interference which Paton represented in the matter of cleansing the cottage. So the hearthrug, a fluffy crimson one, was laid down over the stone floor in front of the fire, and Elliot's house-friend, a large grey cat, curled herself round on it, with much satisfaction.

"Hoo's a good judge," said Will, pointing to the creature, "an' so am I. What wi' this,"—looking at the rug and Nina,—"and th' meats,"—looking at the cupboard and Frances,—"I'll be snug enow."

They left the old man thus mollified. The little crowd that had gathered with so much interest round old Will's abode had broken into scattered groups, commenting upon the scene they had just witnessed. Most of them were of opinion that it was very right and proper; not because they really thought so, but because it is always pleasant to see someone else worried.

Outside the gate Aveland proposed that the Patons should walk back to Sandhayes and lunch there.

"Fleming is coming," he said. "Five is a happy number. Do not reduce it to three."

"I am afraid we must," replied the Vicar, "we have a trick of lingering at your house, and I am due in Riverton early this afternoon."

"But you, Nina," inquired Frances. "Wil make number four?"

Mrs. Paton shook her head.

"Cook is on the war-path," she responded, succinctly. "If you will permit me, I will come in later, when Cyril has gone. However, we will comfort ourselves in a small measure by walking to Sandhayes gates with you."

"I was on the point of proposing that," said Paton, with animation. "I wanted to see you, Fleming, about a scheme of mine for a village library—a very modest scheme. If you refuse it house-room it will never—I fear—get any further. I do not know whether you have heard anything about it?"

"Oh, yes, I have," said Quentin. "You want that cottage next to the smithy, don't you?"

Paton acknowledged that he did, and regarded the cottage in question with a hopeful look. It was in full view, for they had reached the end of the street.

"That is the one," he said. "It is empty, and is larger than most. I thought if you would be so good as to let us have it—rent free, of course—it would suit the purpose admirably. Perhaps," added the Vicar, tentatively, "you would bestow it permanently, considering the use to which it will be applied?"

Quentin shook his head:

"Not permanently. I am rather fond of keeping things as much as possible in my own hands. But I will let you have it rent free, and will, moreover, fit it up as a library, on condition that there is a Women's Reading-room. In fact, I will arrange it so, fitting up two reading-rooms. Do you agree?"

"Oh, certainly. You are most generous."

Paton looked rather surprised as he spoke. He was evidently wondering what had put the idea into Quentin's head. Nina and Aveland both understood per-

fectly. A gleam of amusement shone in Nina's eyes—a gleam of content in Aveland's.

"Most generous," repeated the Vicar. "I feared the fittings would be rather a heavy expense, and in a parish like this one cannot hope to obtain any considerable sum. And there are the books to buy."

"Well," said Aveland, "do not try to fill your readers' heads with a smattering of useless ephemeral learning, that will give them no subject for thought, but merely cause for wrangling. The people here are a fine race, with plenty of imagination. Cultivate that. Give them heroic figures to contemplate, and noble thoughts to float in their minds. That is education. Nothing else is. And in pursuance of this my belief, I will give you Shakespeare, and twenty novels—chiefly historical. It is the fashion to decry that sort of thing on the plea of inaccuracy, but most serious histories seem to me quite as inaccurate and considerably duller."

"And what does it matter anyway?" said Quentin, cheerfully. "Nobody wants to be at school all his life. Let us walk in Arcadia, or Arden, and converse with Touchstone. We shall be infinitely more agreeable companions than if we pored over dry facts till old age, like Faust. Moral: see how Faust ended!"

Three of his hearers laughed and agreed with him. The Vicar pondered a moment, then smiled, and said, "There is a great deal in your view. I myself think the wish to hear a story is natural to all mankind."

"I am sure of it," said Nina. "Mr. Fleming is right. Faust lost his soul through not reading fiction. He wasted his life over what he fancied were the only important facts, and then suddenly awoke to the

knowledge that there were a good many other facts much more important. And, knowing nothing of the relative value of things, he sold his soul to be the cheap hero of a penny dreadful—the villain of a Surrey melodrama. Poetic fiction would have given him higher ideals."

"People who are always searching in the valley of dry bones are certainly very awful," Frances observed. "Last year father and I stayed at a friend's house with a man of that sort. Historical dry bones were his specialty, and I could not have believed that history could be so stupid as that man made it. He was like a phonograph. You turned him on and he ground out just what you expected. He never uttered anything original. How could he? He had had no time to think. All that he knew was put into him, and he simply rolled it out mechanically when wanted. He was positively inhuman, Mr. Paton. I will give the library the principal works of ten modern women authors; and also three of Clark Russell's sea stories, as I believe this sea-going population will appreciate them as I do. I think that in the 'Death Ship' we have the finest conception of the 'Flying Dutchman'—a real human Vanderdecken; with his tender thoughts of his wife and children, his pathetic oblivion of time, his frightful temper, his reckless cruelty. Then the weird old ship—the dull, terrible crew, who ought to be dead men but are not."

"There are a good many of Vanderdecken's crew to be met with up and down the world," commented Aveland, drily.

"On stormy days," continued Frances, "when the sea is rushing over the sandhills, I often picture the

'Braave' sweeping on with her sails shining in the sun, like yellow satin—so old they are. Or at night, with the phosphorescence creeping like glow-worms about her worn timbers."

Paton looked his surprise.

"I have not read the book. I must do so. But I should not have thought sea stories particularly attractive to ladies."

"Now, my dear Cyril," cried his wife, "how can you or any man possibly know what attracts this or that woman? I don't know why we should be supposed to delight in the twaddle and sugar-candy literature so anxiously recommended to us by you men. It is affliction enough to mend stockings at all, without reading how the lovely Lavinia not only mended the family socks, but also those of the pew-opener, the bachelor churchwarden, and the village agitator; even though the last-mentioned was at that moment advocating the nationalization of glebe land, and a free hand with respect to other people's larders. Neither do I understand why, if one scoffs at this sort of thing, one is expected to apply oneself either to mathematics or blasphemy as the sole alternative. One may have a natural affinity for something which is neither twaddle, nor mathematics, nor blasphemy. Now my particular delight is in wild adventure, not at sea, but on land. Plenty of fighting and tumbling over precipices. I had a quiet home and needed something more stirring. So I found it in a top garret and Mayne Reid, and wished myself on the banks of the Rio Grande."

"Mrs. Paton, that is not sentimental."

"It is not, Dr. Aveland. I was never sentimental.

That all women are sentimental is another masculine delusion."

"Not my delusion," said Aveland, with his own peculiar air of suppressed entertainment mingled with profound melancholy.

They had reached Sandhayes now, and were standing by the gate, between the clipped yews.

"It is to be hoped," said Quentin, "that the flood of knowledge about to be let loose in North Rode will not lead to breaches of the peace. Not long ago two of our fellows at the Works read a life of William Wallace, and argued so hotly as to whether we were justified in hanging him, that ordinary human language failed, and they took to the only true Volapuk—blows. Finally, one student of Scottish history was carried to the hospital and the other marched off to the police station."

"Is that really true?" asked Paton, incredulously.

"Really. It happened last autumn."

This mention of the Works put another idea into the Vicar's head.

"Do you think your uncle would assist us? Of course North Rode is not Woffendale, but as his son——" Here it occurred to the speaker that Ralph Fleming's mysterious death on Wildersmoor was not exactly calculated to endear the locality to his father.

"I mean," hastily changing the sentence, "that possibly as a sort of memorial, you know——?"

"I will ask him. I am dining with him to-night."

A slight shadow passed over Fleming's face as he spoke. Nina noticed it.

"Now that we have quite settled the affairs of the village, let us depart, Cyril. Dr. Aveland will be thank-

ful to get rid of us, for his lunch must be ready. I suppose newspapers will be allowed at the library?—a pity. Who was the man who said if it had not been for newspapers he might have known something? Doing good is very wearisome. Nowadays one is so worried about it, that one longs to set sail for some blessed spot—if such exists—where there are no politics, no proletariat, no public meetings."

CHAPTER XV

WHEN Quentin entered his uncle's drawing-room in Woffendale that evening—a drawing-room in which the upholsterer had done everything and the inhabitants nothing—he found Esmé Rusholme sitting there alone. She was wearing a simple grey frock with black ornaments; a frock that would harmonize with the mourning of her hostess, and convey a delicate sense of sympathy with the family grief. Quentin noticed the gown, and fancied it might be truly worn for Ralph. Certainly Ralph had behaved extremely ill to their old playmate. His attentions to Esmé had been very marked, and then—had dropped. Perhaps she had been fond of him? And thinking of all this, Quentin's manner, as he greeted her, had a softened gentleness that struck her with surprise. "What did it mean?" she wondered. He was always friendly and brotherly, but this was new. Was he afraid that her cousin, Jack Ulyett, might write to her?—might make damaging admissions? Well, if Quentin thought this, so much the better, and it was with great inward cheerfulness that Esmé opened the attack.

"Mrs. Holt is talking to a poor woman in the library," she said, in answer to his inquiries, "and I think Mr. Fleming is dressing. It is a long time since we have seen you, Quentin."

People brought up in the same neighbourhood gen-

erally address each other by their Christian names, and Esmé was careful to keep up this custom of bygone childhood.

"Surely it is not very long," he said; "but so much has happened since, that perhaps the time seems longer. I am sorry, Esmé."

He intended to convey his regret and sympathy for all the annoyances she might have experienced through his cousin. His listener took it merely as a nervous apology.

"We shall be pleased to see you at any time. We are your old friends—your best friends. I should have thought that every consideration would have led you to us, Quentin. But I hear you are taking Ralph's place at Sandhayes."

Fleming's face darkened.

"Ralph was never welcome at Sandhayes," he said, briefly.

"And you are?—is that it? Am I to conclude you are engaged to Frances Aveland?"

"No, I am not." There was a lingering in the tones of his voice that Esmé noted with the cold, inward displeasure which was her form of anger. He added, after a moment's pause—

"Yet I hope I am welcome."

He was more obstinate than she had expected. He must be made to see that silence is not freely given; a price must be paid for every good thing in this world.

"It is natural that Dr. Aveland should wish his daughter to marry well. Though poor Ralph is gone, you remain."

Quentin glanced at her in astonished anger. There

is something peculiarly irritating in the deliberate repetition of a statement one has just contradicted. He reflected, however, that Esmé could hardly be expected to be just to the Avelands considering Ralph's behaviour. He concluded she was still jealous of Frances, and responded with grave gentleness.

"We will not discuss Sandhayes, Esmé. We shall never agree."

"I do not wish to discuss the Sandhayes people. They do not interest me. I merely wish to point out to you, Quentin, that it is not wise to seek out comparative strangers in preference to old friends who can be trusted—like Jack."

Quentin had been tugging his moustache and studying the pattern of the carpet. The significance of her tone struck him with fresh surprise and he looked up, wondering why she should so suddenly drag Ulyett into the conversation, particularly as she and her cousin had never agreed.

"Dear old Jack!" he said. "Have you heard from him?"

The remark was innocent enough; it was made simply because Esmé seemed to expect a reply. She imagined it to be a veiled question—an attempt to ascertain how much she knew.

"I can keep your secret—yours and Jack's."

Fleming thought she was alluding to the money he had lent Ulyett, and was puzzled and slightly annoyed to find the matter known. He was wishing devoutly that either old Elkanah would finish his toilet, or Mrs. Holt her interview with her protégée, when Esmé sent an arrow home by adding still more significantly—

"You are safe with me. We are old playmates, and an old playmate will be silent and extend forgiveness where strangers"—with an emphasis on the word—"would shrink away."

She watched him closely as she said this, but Quentin gave no sign that there was any serious meaning in her words. If she had expected him to be startled, or in any way disturbed, then was she utterly mistaken. The strong hand pulling his moustache was steady as ever, the bronzed skin neither pale nor flushed, his eyes—well, she could not see his eyes. He was sitting in a low chair, leaning forward with an elbow on his knee, and apparently still studying the sombre colours of the carpet. Her words were vague, they might mean much—or nothing. What he would have replied he himself never knew, for while he deliberated the door opened and Mrs. Holt entered. Behind her came Elkanah Fleming, and following him, the anouncement of dinner.

"You see, Quentin," said his uncle, "we know better than to invite you to spend the evening with two old fogies."

Which remark was not agreeable to Mrs. Holt.

"I am sure, Elkanah," she observed, frigidly, "your nephew is always quite as willing to come when we are by ourselves. But recently, since poor Ralph's loss, I have felt great comfort in Esmé's society."

"And I am so glad to be of any use, dear Mrs. Holt," murmured Esmé, slipping modestly into her chair, opposite Quentin.

"That's right," rejoined Elkanah. "It is something for us to have youth in the house now and then." He sighed and frowned; then added, "Not but what Quen-

tin comes often enough. I'm not finding fault. Still, Maria, it stands to reason that we are not much company for him."

"Happily Mrs. Holt does not believe that," said Quentin, "or I should be in well-deserved disgrace."

"I never believe any of my brother-in-law's jokes," she replied with a severe air and a softened tone: the air being for the elder, the tone for the younger—Fleming.

Elkanah snorted, then turned to his nephew.

"You're a regular hermit, lad, in that old place by yourself. Not but what I like the old Hall well enough, if it could be picked up and set down in a cheerful neighbourhood instead of on that God-forgotten moor." And the old man's hand shook slightly as he lifted his glass.

Quentin said nothing. Usually he was an enthusiastic defender of his native moorland, now he sat silent. What could he say? It was surely natural that the old man should thus speak of the place where his son had died. But was Wildersmoor God-forgotten?—the wide undulating land with the breath of the sea stealing over it. It was easier to picture the Lord God walking there in the cool of the day than in the stifling clamorous streets of Woffendale; where the hot black smoke obscured His heaven, so that men saw never the blue consoling depths nor the glitter of Orion's sword; and when there is neither hope nor fear, what is left but to wallow?

"The Hall is certainly dreary for a solitary person."

Mrs. Holt said this with a prim little smile. She had expected Esmé and Ralph to marry, and it was entirely in accordance with Mrs. Holt's ideas of what

was becoming that Esmé should—on Ralph's death—transfer her affections to his cousin. "A truly modest girl," Mrs. Holt had once been heard to say, "has no preferences. It is proper to seek a husband, but most improper to wish for any particular one." In her eyes all enthusiasm was the result of neglected education combined with original sin. Like the Yankee captain, she believed in sitting upon the safety-valve. If an explosion blew the vessel into the air, she was ready to blame the Divine Builder for faulty construction rather than her own fashion of managing it.

She was of opinion that Quentin needed a wife like Esmé. She would clip his fancies and enthusiasms as the gardener clipped any straggling twigs of the Sandhayes yews. Mrs. Holt had some faint unacknowledged regret that there was not more to clip about him. Ralph had interested her deeply, because he presented such a fine field for religious effort. There was scarcely anything on the two Tables of Stone that could not be hurled at him with the certainty of hitting; and the tolerably frequent presence of such a hardened and impenitent sinner had given a real zest to the family prayers, at which Mrs. Holt presided every morning.

Now Ralph was gone, and with him had vanished that war-dance of the seven deadly—six rather, for avarice had not been one of Ralph Fleming's vices—which had wheeled and flickered, advanced and retreated before Mrs. Holt's scandalized eyes for the last seven or eight years; and she missed the excitement of the perpetual conflicts between Ralph and his attendant devils on the one hand, and his father and herself on the other.

Therefore she turned to the only amusement just then available—the arrangement of Quentin's future. She approved of the idea all the more because she vaguely felt Esmé Rusholme was not the sort of woman he would choose if left to himself. Men did not know what was good for them, but with proper management they could generally be induced to marry the right person. She would assist Esmé to the utmost of her power. Little did Mrs. Holt imagine what small need that young woman had of assistance—what a weapon she held in reserve. The duel was a more deadly one than could enter the extremely circumscribed imagination of Elkanah Fleming's sister-in-law. She did not believe in dramatic situations. Tragedies might occur on the stage, or in books—two things for which she felt supreme contempt—but in real life there were no high lights nor deep shadows; in fact, they were not exactly respectable. Provided you had a well-regulated mind, nothing particular could possibly happen to you. Mrs. Holt's statement that Wildersmoor Hall was dreary for a solitary man passed without comment, but it gave Esmé an opportunity for ascertaining Fleming's movements that day.

"Have you come from the Hall just now, Quentin?"

"Yes. I've been riding about the moor all day."

And by the look of contentment that passed across his face, she knew he had ridden to Sandhayes.

"Been to see Aveland?" asked Elkanah. "Oh—ah—you were going there last night. Is he better?"

The question surprised Quentin. His uncle and Dr. Aveland had met now and then at Wildersmoor, but as the latter's health prevented him going out else-

where, the two had seen little of each other. Then Elkanah had been considerably ruffled by the decisive note found in his son's pocket, so that his inquiring in tones of friendly interest about Aveland's health was wholly unexpected amiability, and Quentin wondered as he replied:

"He appears to me much as usual, but McKie says he is no better; in fact, thinks him getting worse."

"I should have supposed Dr. Aveland would have resided in the south, as he belongs to that part."

Mrs. Holt spoke as though the Avelands did her a personal injury by living at Sandhayes.

"Well, I suppose he knows his own business best," said Elkanah. "The air is mild—I daresay it suits him, and the old farmhouse is snug enough."

"The Patons were there," Quentin continued. "He is getting up a village library. Any contributions gratefully accepted."

"Mr. Paton was talking to me about it at Riverton," said Esmé. "I think he wished me to ask you to assist him."

This was a tolerably solid assumption of proprietorship on Esmé's part.

"Did he? He has summoned up enough courage to ask me himself.

"Never knew a parson too shy to beg," growled Elkanah. "How much?"

"He did not want cash, but a cottage."

"You didn't give it to him outright, I hope?"

"No. Only permission to use it rent free."

Elkanah nodded approval.

"That's right. Always keep things in your own hands. Nowadays it does not do to give to the Church

when there's a chance of seeing the Pope in the pulpit one day and an infidel dog the next!"

Mrs. Holt interposed.

"Really, Elkanah, your language is unduly violent."

"So are the opinions of the rascals I have mentioned," he retorted. "I and my forefathers, Maria, have always been good Churchmen, and I'll be hanged if there'll be a Church for Churchmen to go to soon! Well, Quentin, I don't mind giving the parson a twenty pound note to buy some books with. I once intended to give Woffendale a free library at my death, but now that they have started one on the rates, not a penny shall they ever get from me. Perhaps I will do more for this North Rode one by-and-by."

"Paton will whoop for joy at the sight of twenty pounds," said Quentin. "Now, Mrs. Holt, will you too join the happy band of helpers?"

Mrs. Holt's air was judicial.

"As North Rode is quite another parish I think I must decline to assist the undertaking, though it has my sincere sympathy. If you will invite us to tea some day, Quentin," with a prim smile, and indicating Esmé by a sideway nod, "we might drive over from Wildersmoor and look at the cottage you are lending."

Mrs. Holt felt this was really a brilliant stroke of diplomacy on behalf of her favourite.

"That will be delightful, dear Mrs. Holt."

Esmé's eyes were downcast, but the lashes were raised an instant to see how Quentin took this proposal, and he caught the look. These furtive glances of Esmé's always had a repellent effect upon him; they conveyed a suggestion of treachery, which came now to his mind with double force as he recalled the con-

versation before dinner. For this reason Mrs. Holt's sudden freak annoyed him. He was not desirous of placing Esmé so conspicuously as regarded his home and belongings. There was a perceptible second before he replied.

"The Hall and everything therein is entirely at your disposal at any time, Mrs. Holt, whether I am at home or not."

It was not the kind of response expected. Mrs. Holt, whose obtuseness was of an amazing quality, merely supposed Quentin did not perceive the happiness intended for him. Old Elkanah, looking at his nephew from under his bushy eyebrows, came nearer perception of the truth; Esmé, by the light of cold jealousy and vindictive hate, saw and comprehended perfectly. Her thin lips tightened as she mentally resolved to deal him an extra stab for that speech.

"You should give an entertainment, lad," said his uncle. "People expect it from a young fellow with a big house, something smart."

"So I will. But of what sort? No use venturing on a garden party till June, and even then I should put up a tent ready for the rain that is certain to arrive with the guests. I don't know that common humanity would not also compel me to add hot-water pipes."

"I do not consider this climate so very bad," this from Esmé, in a slightly hard tone.

"Well, Woffendale has no climate whatever. Its atmosphere—winter and summer—is simply that of a roofed-in railway station open at both ends. Occasionally a breeze blows in at one or the other end and stirs up the smoke a little. As for the air of Wil-

dersmoor, it is mild and I like it; but its best friend could not call it dry."

"Why not try something musical, say a concert? There are good choirs in Woffendale to be had."

"A good idea. I will think of it."

"Very nice, I am sure," said Mrs. Holt, "but I hope, Quentin, you will have really good music; an oratorio, for instance. However, that will be by-and-by. Suppose we now fix a day for driving over to see this library cottage."

Whereupon Quentin perceived there was no crawling out of that excursion.

"Any day will suit me," he replied.

Then glancing at his uncle, invited him also.

The old man shook his head.

"Thank you, lad, but I'll not come. You give the parson that twenty pound note from me, and he'll like it a deal better than my company."

Here Mrs. Holt, after consulting Esmé, announced that that day week would be most convenient for their visit to North Rode.

"And we must settle about the entertainment when you join us," she added, rising and rustling away, followed by Esmé.

CHAPTER XVI

"MARIA is settling your affairs for you!" remarked Elkanah, as his nephew closed the door. "Now the women are gone I want to speak to you about a letter I've had. You recollect that note from the girl Darlow, found in poor Ralph's pocket? Well, she writes to me, hinting she could supply information which might be of use. Of course, she asks for money. Here's the letter."

Quentin took the crumpled, ill-written epistle, read it slowly, and laid it down.

"It is very vague," he said. "What do you propose to do?"

"I have sent the money," in a slightly apologetic tone.

"Have you?" Quentin was genuinely surprised.

"You see I am getting old and shaky. I can't afford to lose any time. If I die before Ralph's murderer is found, he never will be found. I don't blame you, lad; you can't be expected to feel in this matter as I do. I know that after my death time will drift on, and the murder will become merely another 'mysterious case,' and will gradually be forgotten. Therefore I must leave no chance untried. I have sent the sum the woman asks for, and have told her I wish for a personal interview."

Quentin took up the letter.

"She does not say that she is coming home."

"No, but she probably will, in the hope of getting more out of me. Her grandmother lives in one of those cottages by you, doesn't she? I recollect McKie telling me so. I think I'll come over and see her."

"Very well. I am sure, however, that Granny Darlow knows nothing."

"She will know whether her granddaughter is returning or not. Don't tell her I am coming. I will take the old woman by surprise."

It was not possible for any created being to take Granny Darlow by surprise, but neither man knew this. Elkanah Fleming, despite his nephew's assurance of Granny's ignorance, fancied he had struck on what might prove a fresh and reliable clue to the identity of the stranger who had crossed Wildersmoor so fatally. Over this thought he brooded for some minutes with grim satisfaction. During those minutes Quentin, too, sat silent, pondering painfully. Did Granny—did Rossela—know that Ulyett was on the moor that night? How did they know? Had Granny seen him? Well, Ulyett was safe in Africa, his voice was not likely to fall on Blind John's ears. Quentin hated himself as he thought this. But Elkanah's suspicions fairly roused, it was open to him to obtain the young man's recall—the Flemings had interest with the firm that employed Ulyett—and if sent for he would return to England unconscious of there being any charge against him. Here Quentin's imagination began to work. He pictured the consequences of Ulyett being publicly accused of Ralph Fleming's murder. What would Frances Aveland say? What would she do? Would there be anything left to live for sup-

posing that life were left? Or would the careless handling of an unloaded gun prove the best ending to the play?

What was Esmé Rusholme's half-hinted knowledge? He began to feel the jar and fret from which the moorland spring beauty had freed him. All these intangible coils were falling round him like the gossamer threads in the fairy tale, ghostly—filmy—so impalpable—scarcely visible, save when the light fell here and there on the filaments. Would they float away—vanish? Or would they—as in the story—suddenly strengthen, close—change to bonds of steel that crushed out breath and life? He looked at his uncle. Elkanah was leaning back in his chair, gazing fixedly before him, his fingers grasping a wine-glass. Suppose fate granted the old man's wish and hanged Ralph's murderer? How many of our wishes would gratify us, if we had them? It is always the thing we have not that seems so fair—the sparkling water that flows away from our thirsty lips, the brilliant fruit that the wind tosses beyond our reach. The revenge that seemed fair in Elkanah Fleming's eyes was Dead Sea apples, indeed!

He roused himself and said:

"Did you speak, lad?"

"No, but I will do whatever you wish in this matter."

Quentin said this remorsefully. There was a growing feebleness about his uncle that was becoming more perceptible week by week.

"Yes, yes, I know you will. You don't seem to get on very well with Esmé Rusholme? Maria has an idea you would suit each other."

"Mrs. Holt is mistaken. I do not think either of us would agree with her."

"I don't know about that. Miss Esmé seems to take a good deal of interest in our family, judging by the way she comes to see Maria. No young woman in her senses would pester herself with Maria unless she had her eye on one of the men belonging to her. Ralph is dead, and I am too old, so it must be you."

Quentin laughed.

"Quite a mistake. I don't think I am a favourite with Esmé."

"Nor she with you? Well, that's your business, of course. I only wished to know if you were going to marry her. I suppose Ralph was the man then, as it isn't you."

"Surely we may allow her to come and see Mrs. Holt without any other thought?"

"Pooh! Maria's fool enough to think that. I know better. It must have been Ralph. He used to go to the Rusholmes' a good deal. Was friendly with that scamp of a cousin of theirs—Ulyett, who has gone to the West Coast. Best place for him. He'll never come back. Ah, a good deal of Ralph's cash went that way."

"And Ulyett's too."

"Ralph took Ulyett's money? I don't believe it. Besides, the fellow had none, unless he stole it. Quite capable of that, I don't doubt. I noticed the girl Darlow mentioned him in that first letter, said he had called to see Ralph in Driffield. Wanted to borrow more money, of course."

"Or to get paid." Quentin felt impelled to defend Ulyett, even at the risk of giving his uncle the fatal clue.

"Nonsense! Nothing of the kind. You'll not make me believe that rubbish. But about Esmé Rusholme. If Ralph was philandering after her, what's the meaning of Aveland's telling him to keep away from Sandhayes? Pretty cool, I call that!"

"A man has a right to forbid another his house if he chooses."

Elkanah glanced at his nephew, and restrained himself. The letter had touched his pride. He had had time to ponder it since his son's death. Now he would have flown into one of his rages had he dared; but the tone of Quentin's voice was ominous, so the elder Fleming contented himself with saying,

"Oh, ay, Aveland has got a handsome daughter, and he fancies nobody is good enough for her. That's about it, I suspect." He glanced again at his nephew. "You are often at Sandhayes. I suppose it is Frances Aveland. Well, I'll make no objection. I'll overlook that impudent letter of his. It's time you married, Quentin."

"I am not sure that I shall marry," said Quentin, slowly. "We will not discuss the question, anyway."

"Not marry!" Elkanah fairly gasped in wrathful astonishment. "Why not, pray? Have you gone crazy? What the deuce is to become of the money, I'd like to know? And there's not only the money to be thought of; we're not sprung up like mushrooms; we're as old a family as any in the county, and you are the last. Do you want me to marry again at my time of life? Take care you don't drive me to it! But you are independent of me, and so you don't care what becomes either of me or the money."

"I certainly don't care about the money, but if I could buy back Ralph's life with my own——"

"There!" interrupted Elkanah, irritably, "don't tell me any more. I don't set up my son as a saint; and, as for business, Ralph would have made ducks and drakes of the finest fortune in no time. You're all right; you'll keep things together. If one of you was to go, it was best to be Ralph. I'm not such a fool as not to see that—unless you're getting your head full of whims, the Lord knows where from. What is it to me whether you want the money or not? Can't I leave it as I please? Do you think I'm going to endow an hospital with it?—or send the Congo niggers to college? It's a fine thing if a man cannot leave his earnings to his own kith and kin without them sniffing at it! I don't care who you marry, provided she is a respectable young woman; but marry you must. If you like Aveland's daughter, I'll undertake to swallow that letter. If Esmé Rusholme——"

"Nothing would induce me to marry Esmé Rusholme," said Quentin emphatically.

"Do as you please. You'll do that anyway. I'll be shot if this won't give me an attack of gout. I shall be sending for McKie to-night—more guineas in that old rascal's pocket! That girl of Aveland's is an only child, which is an advantage. Your wife's sisters don't matter, but your wife's brothers are apt to prove expensive relations. By the way, I have had fresh handbills printed and put up, increasing the reward to seven hundred. The first bills were getting dirty and torn; these will stir people's memories, and let them know I'm still on the alert and ready and willing to pay the sum—now seven hundred—if anyone has

sense enough to earn it. Did you see them as you came along?"

"I did not notice."

"Well, you will as you go home. There is one by the station."

Quentin made no reply. He opened the door for his uncle, observing afresh the shaken look of the old man. He had aged perceptibly during the last two months. Where was the use of telling him that his nephew did not intend to marry? Why contradict and irritate him needlessly? Quentin was not sure that he should not marry. It had seemed impossible a little while ago; it had even seemed wrong. But after every self-sacrificing resolve there comes, sooner or later, a mighty reaction in favour of a precisely opposite course; and this opposing current had seized upon Quentin, sweeping him out from the narrow channel within whose boundaries he had purposed to remain, into the wide glorious ocean. Ages ago his Norse ancestors had set sail in spring for fairer lands, heedless of what the end of the voyage might be. Better the joyous rush over the sunlit waves, no matter what breakers ahead, than sitting at home like a craven monk. To-day had given him a feeling of reckless exhilaration; the subtle intoxication of Wildersmoor, when earth seems to stir like a Titaness in her sleep, to stretch her mighty limbs, half-roused by the whisper of Spring—a slow, heavy awaking, like that of Buonarroti's Dawn: for here is Spring, no dancing flower-decked maiden. Often it is the more barren places of earth that wield most enduring influence—the desert, the steppe, the moorland. These sink into the human spirit, colouring it with their own hues—

a deep indelible colouring, as of dark iron. For the silent expanse possesses, or seems to possess, a force of repressed life wanting in sunnier spots; as in the cold marble of the Dawn dwell the sorrow, the despair, the vitality and endurance of the great Florentine himself.

Thus the scents of that rolling moorland—of moss and peat and freshly turned soil, pressed out and held in solution as it were by the warm, humid climate—pass into the blood like rare wine; till at the yearly resurrection the familiar earth seems to become flesh and flesh earth, and kindred dust calls unto dust—not to lie down in death, but—to rise to fuller life and rejoice greatly.

So it happened inevitably that the penetrating odours of the wet brown earth—strange fumes arising from earth's alembic—that he had breathed year after year, now in the time of their returning—subtle and strong as ever, for when does Mother Earth grow old?—swayed Quentin Fleming mightily towards the reaction that had already faintly begun. Between this reaction and the scent of Wildersmoor running riot in his veins, Quentin was in no mood to recall his resolutions of two months ago. He was beginning to suspect that those self-immolating intentions might possibly repair a well-known pavement. And seeing that our good intentions may not, after all, be so altogether excellent as our natural conceit would have us believe, it may be well that most of them find their ultimate destination in a place where—of course—we are not likely to meet them again.

CHAPTER XVII

THERE was not much conversation in the drawing-room. Elkanah settled himself in an armchair by the fire, opposite his sister-in-law, who had taken up her knitting. Esmé, at Mrs. Holt's request, dragged out of the smart piano a lugubrious wailing, politely termed "A Poet's Lament;" after which she entertained her hostess with anecdotes of the Sunday School, while Quentin took her place at the piano and soothed his soul with song.

"Don't stop, lad," said Elkanah, as the ballad came to an end. "I recollect your father singing that thing when we were young fellows. It seems but yesterday"—he knitted his grey brows—"yet half the world has died since then."

"Surely that is an exaggeration, Elkanah?"

Mrs. Holt never allowed such rampant expressions to pass unchallenged.

"It's near enough, Maria," settling himself to listen as his nephew's voice rose again.

Esmé did not pay much heed to the singing, she did not care particularly about it. It was not an accomplishment to be encouraged in a husband, as leading to personal vanity and an undue love of society. She was accustomed to her father's organ-playing—John Rusholme had a chamber-organ in which his soul delighted—that was different. The man who playeth,

playeth to himself; the man who singeth, desireth an audience and applause. Esmé resolved that when she married Quentin, he should settle down to more sober tastes than music.

The song ceased. Not so the Sunday School anecdotes. They appeared to be a harmless topic of conversation, and Quentin was rash enough to join in.

"Are your scholars satisfactory on the whole, Esmé?"

She paused.

"Perhaps I can hardly put myself on a level with the other teachers, but the children are very good."

Esmé depreciated herself on principle. He that humbleth himself shall be exalted; but if the exaltation did not arrive speedily, things were unpleasant in the neighbourhood of Esmé Rusholme.

"You are indefatigable in well-doing, Miss Esmé," observed Elkanah from the depths of his chair.

"I think it only right to do what one can, Mr. Fleming. It is so little after all." Then to Quentin—"Do you know whether help is still needed at North Rode? I could again spare alternate Sunday afternoons, and I do so delight in the work."

"I will ask the Patons if they want more assistance," he replied lazily, "but I am afraid the Sunday trains are not very convenient. North Rode is not bountifully supplied at any time, you know."

Esmé arranged the lace frilling of her sleeve.

"I could come on the other line to Wildersmoor. For such a purpose you would surely drive an old playfellow across the moor, Quentin? I should be so pleased to be of the smallest use to Mr. Paton, and of course I could not possibly walk the distance."

"An excellent plan," said Mrs. Holt with emphatic approval.

Elkanah shot an expressive glance at his nephew, who, though considerably taken aback, rose to the occasion.

"If Paton has a class requiring a guide, philosopher, and friend, I will take care that the dog-cart meets you at Wildersmoor station whenever you like, Esmé. I am sorry I cannot be charioteer myself, but I generally go over to North Rode every Sunday morning for service, and don't come home till dinner."

There was a moment's silence. Elkanah Fleming, perceiving the drift of things, began to enjoy himself. He was so desirous Quentin should marry that he would have accepted almost any niece-in-law. But now that he had discovered where his nephew's choice lay, the joint scheming of Mrs. Holt and Esmé amused him, and also disposed him to lean more towards the Avelands. For a Fleming to be hunted into matrimony was undignified; therefore, as the old man saw the very deliberate arrangements of the two conspirators, he chuckled over the equally deliberate repulse they received.

"Where do you lunch, then?" inquired Mrs. Holt, with severity.

"Sometimes at Sandhayes, sometimes at the Vicarage," replied the culprit, with great cheerfulness. "There are charitable souls at both places. Later I have occasionally taken a hand in the Sunday School, as you propose doing, Esmé."

Elkanah nodded approval, for to uphold Church and State—always remembering to keep a tight hand on the parson—and to seek a suitable wife, are good and

reasonable things, and much to be desired in one's heir, and, indeed, in all men. For these are the solid British feet on which the Empire stands.

Then the elaborate clock tinkled ten, and Esmé rose, saying she had "promised to be home early. Mamma was alone. Isabel and George had gone with papa to a dance at the Wards', so the carriage could not come for her. Would Quentin walk with her?"

Here Elkanah interposed, a cab should be sent for. But of this Esmé would not hear, it was not worth while; the cabstand was so near, she was sure Quentin would not mind.

Of course Quentin could not mind. He signified his willingness to walk to the cabstand or anywhere else; and Esmé, followed by Mrs. Holt, disappeared to put on her hat.

"You're in for it, lad," observed Elkanah, when they were alone. "Don't tell me it's Maria, or poor Ralph, or anyone but yourself. That young woman means you, and she'll let you know it as you walk home. Cab?—pooh!—she doesn't intend to take a cab. She intends to bring you to a better state of mind—from her point of view. You're not one to be chivied into marrying a woman, are you?" in a doubtful tone. "I don't care who you marry, but I shall be annoyed by Maria's crowing if you have chosen one woman and she makes you take another."

Quentin laughed.

"My dear uncle, there really is no cause for alarm. I don't suppose I am the subject of the attack you imagine."

"You'll see," quoth the elder Fleming, oracularly.

And Quentin did see before the end of that walk.

The night was fairly clear for Woffendale, where the pall of smoke ever interposes between earth and heaven; and the air was mild and damp and stifling.

"I think," said Esmé, when they had made their adieux, and were out in the long gaslit road, "it is a pity to drive in such fine weather. I will walk home. I should so enjoy it. You will have plenty of time to catch your train, Quentin."

"Lots," he replied good-humouredly, glancing down from his own unusual height at the tall thin prim figure of his companion, a figure which suggested somehow a scantiness of mind and body; so different —so very different to Frances Aveland's luxuriant grace.

They walked on silently for a few minutes. The road was a tolerably quiet one, leading from the town nearly to the eastern slopes of Wildersmoor Pike, and bordered by large stone houses with trim gardens where nipped evergreens strove with the all-pervading smoke; a wealthy depressing nightmare of a road, well-paved, well-drained, well-lighted, and absolutely hideous. Here and there flashes of scarlet light from the nearest furnaces obliterated for a moment the decorous gas-lamps, and cast dense greenish-black wild-waving shadows, whose fantastic antics were an inspiriting relief from the deadly monotony of that curveless well-cared-for road. It is best to take that road at night. The erratic human spirit feels a grim delight in those mocking giant-shadows dancing derisively over all that is orderly and respectable.

Esmé and Quentin walked on; now in the furnace glare, now in the fantastic shadows, now in the sober

rays of the gas-lamps and the glimmering lights of the houses. From the nearest came tinkling sounds.

"The Kerrs are lively to-night," said Fleming. "I hear Charlie's banjo going—a sign that they are not alone. They seem to imagine there is something dangerous about music without the excuse of guests. It may lead to riotous living and the husks of the swineherd."

Esmé, however, took no interest just then in the Kerrs; neither did she care to discuss the prodigal. Even to her dull perceptions events were hurrying, crowding one upon another. The tide of life was hastening—sweeping through the rapids. It behoved her to steer her bark well through the rush.

"I am afraid you are a little vexed with me, Quentin. You do not seem to wish me to come to Wildersmoor or to North Rode. Is it because old friends cannot always take kindly to the new? To me your welfare must always come before all other considerations, even the risk of offending you."

"Do I give the impression of being offended? If so, I apologise. As for North Rode"—designedly ignoring the allusion to Wildersmoor—"of course you and Paton will settle all that. Only do not be disappointed if you find there is no vacancy. The school is but a small one."

He spoke lightly, determined to keep the conversation at a safe commonplace level if possible. Esmé's next remark was not promising.

"I should regret not being able to do some little good, but any disappointment I might feel would be trifling compared with that of seeing you bring misfor-

tune on yourself by not listening to those who are your oldest and truest friends."

He looked down at her good-temperedly, they were passing a gas-lamp.

"Don't ask me conundrums, Esmé. I was never a good hand at that sort of thing."

"Do you not believe me your truest friend, Quentin? A man may need a woman's help."

"Thanks. But I am in no difficulty of any kind, so far as I am aware."

Silence again for a few minutes. The giant shadows danced wildly—jubilantly on the grey road, over the big stone houses. The nearest furnace shot out waving banners of blinding flame. They were crossing the end of one of the principal thoroughfares and the hum of the busy streets came to their ears; not the steady roar of London, but an intermittent rattle, above which the human voice made itself evident, mingling with the sharp clacking of wood upon stone—the ring of clogs.

"Let me see, what day are you and Mrs. Holt coming over?" said Fleming, innocently.

"Have you forgotten already?" Esmé laughed, a little unpleasantly. "By the way, shall you ask the Avelands to meet us?"

"I had not thought of it. I had not thought of asking anyone. You will be so short a time at the Hall if you intend driving over to North Rode."

"Ah, you are like poor Ralph. You prefer keeping Sandhayes all to yourself."

Decidedly Esmé Rusholme's temper was not under control. Her jealous hatred of Frances Aveland

flashed out even when it would have been much more politic to have concealed it. But Esmé believed Quentin to be entirely in her power, and minds like hers ignore their own effect upon others and underrate the strength of counter influences. Also, they believe in coercion. Bullying has to them the sacredness of a Sacrament, they and those of whom they approve being the priesthood appointed to administer it. If it fails, the reason of the failure lies undoubtedly in the abnormal wickedness of the person experimented upon. Quentin was a brand to be snatched from the burning and fashioned into a useful household tool.

"Probably you will meet Dr. Aveland at North Rode." Fleming's tone was indifferent.

"Now you are angry!" in an injured voice. "You have no cause to be. I don't care about Ralph. It is a little hard to be received as an enemy when one stretches out a helping hand. But I am ready to make every allowance for one in your position, Quentin. Nothing troubles me except the thought that you may take another fatal step and so lose yourself."

"I shall not take another step, and I have not lost either of us, for here we are," he rejoined carelessly, stopping before one of the solid, comfortable-looking stone houses. "I will wait till you are inside the door. Good-night." He opened the gate and held out his hand.

"Are you not coming in, Quentin?"

"Not to-night, I think. I have barely time to catch my train."

"There is a later train. Mamma would be pleased to see you."

"I should be still more pleased to see Mrs. Rush-

olme. Pray tell her so. Nevertheless, I cannot stay to-night."

"Then it is good-bye till this day week?"

"Oh, I may perhaps drop in before then. Good-night, Esmé."

"Good-night."

The shadows danced more wildly than ever, as Quentin turned back to the station. He was very sensible now of the strength of the web, and of the intentions of the weaver. She had, or thought she had, a hold upon him, and she meant to use that hold to separate him from Frances Aveland. A slow conviction forced itself upon his mind that his uncle's surmises might be correct. It was not a pleasant conviction to a man of generous feelings, and Quentin thrust it from him; yet it returned. How else could Esmé's words and manner be explained? Passing the elder Fleming's house, he glanced up at the lighted windows and wondered for how much of this the old man and Mrs. Holt were responsible. Had they suggested to Esmé the preposterous idea that he—Quentin—had any stronger feeling for her than that of an old friend and playmate?

But what if they had? A few idle jests neither justified nor explained Esmé's attitude. Clearly she meant to tighten her grasp, and to use whatever weapon she had in reserve. What was that weapon? How had she obtained it? An element of astonishment mingled with Fleming's anger. Could this be his playmate, Esmé? He had never admired her, either physically or mentally; but he had had for her that lazy liking which generally exists between men and women who have been companions in childhood.

He had believed her attached to Ralph, and had reproached him with desertion of her, when Ralph suddenly ceased his visits to the Rusholme's, and bent his steps towards North Rode instead. Quentin had pitied the girl with generous indignation; and this amazing change in her, this wholly unlooked-for attack upon his love and his liberty, this attempt to coerce him by means of veiled threats—seemed to him well-nigh incredible, so unexpected was it.

He was fairly in the town now—the untidy, jostling crowd, making way before his swinging stride. Here and there a man saluted him. Once he stopped to pick up a screaming child that had tumbled into the gutter by reason of its clogs being too large for it. The street was full of children; in Woffendale they never seem to go to bed at all. A fight was progressing at one corner—a political discussion at another. It would have been hard for a stranger to know which was which. By the station several men were standing before a placard, one reading it aloud. It was Elkanah Fleming's offer of a larger reward. The reading stopped as Quentin turned into the station, and the men looked after him with interest.

"Happen he'd give summat, too, if th' felly wur caught," suggested one. "Anyways he'd let th' chaps at th' Works ha' a holiday when th' hanging coom off. He couldna do less than that."

Quentin overheard the remark and laughed. There was a grim humour about the situation. Certainly he could not do less than that.

The slow train clanged on its way to Wildersmoor, rounding the right flank of the Pike. Quentin was alone in the carriage. When the noise and glare and

smoke of Woffendale were left behind, and the cool breath of the silent moor blew in at the window, he looked out into the starry darkness where, in the south-west, Orion glittered with sheathless sword, and said, aloud—"I will fight it. I will fight it to the end."

CHAPTER XVIII

FATE was gracious to the Rev. Travis Crosier when, one afternoon of the following week, he chanced to meet Quentin Fleming at the Woffendale station. There was a little crowd on the platform, waiting for the North Rode and Riverton train; and Crosier, desirous of collecting his thoughts, retired to the far end, where he paced to and fro, sentry-fashion, meditating.

For he was perturbed in spirit, pleasantly perturbed. He had been to lunch with the Bishop, a glorifying but terrible experience for a young and nervous curate. He had enjoyed himself with fear and trembling. His ears had burnt and his face had paled. He had dropped his knife and fork with a fearful clatter on being suddenly addressed, and with a jerk of his elbow had sent a mustard-pot flying.

But the mustard-pot had been dexterously caught by a footman, and the Bishop had been mercifully oblivious of these small mishaps—had even been bland and gracious. Now that Crosier found himself once more upon ordinary ground, the very ordinary ground of Woffendale station, he strove to bring his disordered mind into some sort of coherence. He wanted to recollect all that had passed; his Lordship's expressed opinions upon this, that, and the other. As a matter of fact, the wary prelate's opinions might fitly be compared to the pavilion of Pari-Banou; contracting till

it could be held in one hand, or expanding to cover an army—either according to the owner's pleasure. Woffendale's Bishop was far too wise to commit himself to any definite statement outside the Apostle's Creed. What with schismatics of every dye, rabid Evangelists, aggressive Broad Churchmen, and domineering Ritualists, the episcopal dignity is in these days no ambling palfrey, but a buck-jumping animal that needs well-nigh the skill of a Texan cowboy.

His Lordship of Woffendale was a good rider. Therefore the clearer Crosier's mind became, the less he felt able to recall the conversation. It had been soothing, paternal, elusive, pre-eminently safe. What had the Bishop said upon the question of birettas? Crosier distinctly remembered tentatively introducing the subject. But the Bishop had not said anything. He had turned his head at that moment to give an order to a servant, had then apologized for not having heard the Curate's last remark, and had blandly talked of quite other matters. Which was a disappointment to the Rev. Travis Crosier, whose soul hankered after a biretta. He possessed to the full that amazing love of millinery that flourishes so luxuriantly in the masculine breast, and which—denied the tattooing and warpaint of the savage—finds vent in garments of many colours: in wigs and gowns, in hoods and aprons, and such like trifles of mint, anise, and cummin, that not infrequently obscure the weightier matters of truth, justice, and mercy. The Burning of the Vanities?—when did man ever burn his own particular Vanity? Had Savonarola left Art's fair creations in peace, and hurled instead his own gown into the flames, together with judge's robe and conqueror's laurel, one might

feel some small sympathy with his fanaticism. For a great clearing of mental vision is to be obtained by the discarding of ordinary garments. Every petty tyrant, male or female, recognizes this influence by depriving his or her victims of free choice in the matter of raiment; thus blunting the sharp edges of individuality.

If, during the examination of Galileo, their clothes had suddenly flown off his judges, leaving the astronomer alone in possession of doublet and hose, it is possible that his theories might not have seemed so outrageous to his hearers. The dignity of the one clothed man might have had a subduing effect on the naked and astonished rascals. Doubtless, though, the end would have been the same. And why blame them? Do we not all silence—or wish to silence, extinguish, or otherwise dispose of—those whose electric flame of life almost puts out our little farthing dip? It is only natural to protect one's own candle.

Travis Crosier was not one of those graceless ones who see Geisler's hat in the judge's wig, and incontinently long to take a shot at the obnoxious horsehair. The Curate believed in vestments, all and sundry. Personally, he felt they would afford him moral support; and as he paced the farther end of Woffendale platform he wished regretfully that he could have conveyed to Mr. Paton some distinct opinion of the Bishop's on this point—an approving opinion, of course. Crosier was inclined to consider his Vicar a trifle lukewarm.

Then the thought of Esmé Rusholme floated into the Curate's mind on the top of the biretta, so to speak. He felt that she too could give him the moral support he needed. She would be the ideal wife for a

nervous clergyman. He wondered mildly whether her father would give her any fortune. Crosier's income from his curacy was too minute for marriage, and he had no private means. By-and-by he hoped to get a living, which he really deserved, being a good little man; then indeed he might array himself as he thought fit; and if Esmé Rusholme——

At this point of his meditations Crosier caught sight of Quentin Fleming. It would have been difficult not to see him, towering as he did head and shoulders above the crowd. He was looking alert, aggressive, a determined light in his eyes. Fleming was not naturally aggressive, but if the ploughshare be good iron it may be welded into a good sword by the hand of Fate, that mightiest of smiths.

Since that walk with Esmé along the road with its leaping shadows, many things had grown clearer to him, and possible complications had unfolded themselves. He stepped on the platform feeling himself rather the sport of circumstances—a thing he hated. For all his easy good-nature, he had been accustomed to rule himself and his own life; to feel his fate as it were under his own heel. Now that it seemed to be rising, not at his bidding; writhing round his feet, making as though to twist and coil higher, pressing the life out of him; now that this intangible yet deadly enemy was upon him, Quentin felt possessed by a certain rage of life—of fierce opposition to all that would stifle and drag him down. The passion of renunciation that had dominated him on the moor that December night was dying fast, unheeded.

Fleming was returning early to Wildersmoor to be in readiness for his self-invited guests. He had duly

conveyed Elkanah's twenty pounds to Cyril Paton, who had received the contribution with much self-congratulation on his own forethought in asking Quentin to mention the library scheme to his uncle. The Vicar further expressed himself delighted that Mrs. Holt and Miss Rusholme should take sufficient interest in the library to come over to North Rode on account of it. Did they intend returning to Woffendale by train? There might be some little time to wait. His wife would be pleased to see them at the Vicarage. To which Mrs. Paton had assented with an amused glance of friendly assurance and the remark that "Cyril really ought to invite Mr. Crosier, as he admires Esmé Rusholme."

Quentin's merely masculine intelligence did not altogether comprehend the glance, but he felt vaguely comforted. His instincts told him that Nina was a loyal friend. Like many women of her type, she had a genius for friendship. He had not again thought of her remark till now, when on Woffendale platform he met the eyes, or rather the spectacles, of Travis Crosier. Then Fleming recalled Nina's words with a flash of intuition. Here was deliverance, indeed! Never before had the meek little divine appeared so like an angel of light.

Quentin edged his way through the crowd and invited the Curate to join the party at Wildersmoor.

"Come on with me now, Crosier. There will be a spare seat in the dog-cart, you know."

"I shall be delighted," stammered Crosier, beaming. "Mrs. Paton mentioned to me the interest Miss Rusholme took in our projected library. I have been

telling the Bishop about it. I have just been to lunch at the palace."

"Have you? He is a pleasant old boy. I must ask him to the Hall. He has not been there since my father died. I have been somewhat remiss as regards my social duties."

To hear the Lord Bishop of Woffendale spoken of as a pleasant old boy gave the Curate a slight shock. He paused for a moment before replying, while the Wildersmoor and Riverton train steamed up and the platform cleared.

"I daresay you find the Hall rather lonely," he ventured to observe, stumbling into the nearest carriage.

"I hope to remedy that by-and-by," smiling.

Crosier looked sympathetic. He had heard Nina Paton's opinion as to the attraction Sandhayes had for Fleming, and he would have liked to express his gratitude for the assistance he himself was receiving in his love-affairs. He had comparatively few opportunities of meeting Esmé Rusholme. This unexpected invitation was really so very nice. But Crosier stood in considerable awe of Quentin, and fearing to offend, thought it best to speak of less delicate subjects. It was only polite, however, to keep to matters personally interesting to his companion.

"Mr. Fleming ages very much," he said, with a little deprecatory cough to attract attention. Quentin was looking out of the window at the familiar outlines of the Pike drawing nearer. "It is sad that his son's murderer cannot be traced. Yet, doubtless, all such matters are best left to the vengeance of heaven."

"The criminal usually thinks so," said Quentin.

"Yes, certainly. A very happy thing," responded

Crosier, rather flustered. After a moment's pause he resumed.

"That blind man—Blind John—do you believe his story?"

"Oh, yes. I have not a doubt of it."

"There seem to be several cottages near the Hall," the Curate went on. "I asked Mr. Paton about them. He thought that end of the moor was not in his parish."

"That is an old dispute. Nobody will own us. Every surrounding parish says we are not within its boundaries. We are free-lances, so to speak. But hall and hamlet have generally chosen to attach themselves to North Rode."

This spiritual isolation was an awful state of affairs to Crosier's mind.

"I think I will call upon the people," he said, in a tone of subdued dismay. "I suppose there would be no objection?" interrogatively.

"None whatever on anybody's part," returned Quentin, amused at Crosier's evident idea that the hamlet was possessed by Satan, and trying to live up to the character of its owner. "But I assure you the people are all quiet and respectable members of society."

Then he thought of Granny Darlow, and wondered whether Crosier would consider her a quiet and respectable member of society, if he chanced to hear the accepted version of her career.

There could hardly be a greater contrast than between the kindly, precise little divine, with his soul's ears well stuffed with cotton wool, and his soul's eyes shaded by smoke-coloured glasses, lest the cries and

light of life should confuse and dazzle him—and that tragic figure, old, withered, yet still vigorous, who dwelt on Wildersmoor; whose eyes had looked fearlessly into greater depths than the dark pools, and quailed never before the skeletons therein; who, like her of Mycenæ, having been sorely smitten, smote again, and with deadly completeness; and, what is still rarer, remained steadfastly in the same mind, repenting never. What would be Crosier's opinion of Granny Darlow?

Quentin looked at him as he sat evidently meditating on the spiritual darkness of the neglected hamlet. What weight would his opinion carry upon any serious question of life? The thought was flat heresy; yet it seemed to Fleming that a human spirit of Granny Darlow's calibre, might give better advice to a harassed soul than could Travis Crosier; the withered finger of that wicked old crone might point to a more excellent way—to a fuller life than could enter into Crosier's philosophy. At least the old woman would leave the spirit free to spread its wings and try its powers of flight. She would not timidly cage it, lest that flight should lead into storm and darkness. Beyond the storm is yet the pure blue—the clear sunlight. If, with the force and wisdom of the one could be blended the moral scruples of the other——

"Dear me!" ejaculated the Curate, coming out of his reverie. "I had no idea we were so near Wildersmoor."

The day was still and grey, with little warm sea-airs wandering now and then across the moor, and rustling the ivy that waved its green banners from the chimneys of the old Hall. The air was so mild that

some of the cottagers were sitting at their doors in comfortable, old-time fashion, and on the long wooden bench outside the Grey Wolf, a row of elders smoked and gossiped, and watched with interested eyes the arrival of the few passengers alighting at Wildersmoor.

One of these elders—the last man in the row—was Blind John; and as Quentin's familiar step fell on his ear, he touched the grey lock that hung over his forehead.

"A noice day, Mr. Quentin."

"Yes, John, it is," Fleming stopped, and John rose. Crosier looked at him with interest as he stood there, his knotty hands clasping the knob of his stick, his ruddy face with the downcast eyelids over the sightless eyes, the peculiar listening turn of the head, with its thick mat of grey hair.

"This is Mr. Crosier with me," said Quentin, and John touched his lock again.

"Do you live in one of those cottages?" Crosier spoke very distinctly, slightly raising his voice as though he imagined John was deaf as well as blind.

"I moind your voice well, sir, in church at North Rode, though I didna know th' step. Ay, I live in yon last un. Owd Granny Darlow next door redds oop an' cooks fur me; but being as I conna see, th' Lord only knows how hoo keeps th' place."

"I think it is all right, John," interposed Fleming, feeling Granny slandered. She was a clean old woman, with all the north-country love of scrubbing.

"I'm main glad to hear it, sir," responded John, rather as though he wasn't, "fur I've had an argyment now an' then wi' th' owd lass, an' I thowt happen hoo'd take it out of me i' th' redding oop. Hoo's one

o' them soart that yo' conna tell what they'll be oop to."

"I am proposing to visit the cottages here, John, and to read to the people," said Crosier. "I might take you and your neighbour Mrs. Darlow together."

"Thank you, sir. Ay, Granny and I are mooch th' same wi' reading. I conna see to read an' hoo dunnot know how."

"Doesn't she?" the Curate was surprised, "why, how is that? She ought to learn."

"I wouldna loike to be th' teacher," John opined, with dry sarcasm. "As fur how it wur, well, yo' see, sir, hoo's owd. Hoo wur born afore Parson Hazelrigg's toime, an' he died when I wur a little lad. He wur rare an' fond o' mackerel fishing, wur owd Parson Hazelrigg, an' theer's a sight o' mackerel fishing betwixt here an' Man. So when th' season coom round, Parson 'ud shut oop th' church o'er at North Rode an' be off to th' mackerel grounds fur three month an' more. He used to say th' folks on Wildersmoor wurna given to deeing, so it wurna loikely any on 'em 'ud want burying; an' if they did they mun send a cart o'er to Woffendale fur a parson—theer wur no railways then. As fur th' babbies, they mun wait fur to be christened; an' folks as wanted th' banns give out, they mun wait too. 'When it cooms to be atwixt mackerel an' marriage,' parson 'ud say, 'it stonds to reason as marriage mun wait, 'cause th' fish won't. So behave till I coom back,' he says, 'an' I'll give each couple a sovereign fur to begin housekeeping with.' Eh, he wur a rare un, wur owd Parson Hazelrigg!"

Fleming laughed.

"I haven't a doubt of it. Shall we go on, Crosier? Good-bye, John."

Crosier's face during John's narrative had been a delicate study of shades of apologetic dismay, culminating in positive horror. For a minute or two he trotted along in depressed silence. Then he turned for sympathy to his companion.

"One feels so overcome when the Church's past neglect is brought home to us."

"I think the clergy of that day sufficed for the needs of the people," Quentin replied, encouragingly. "We are too apt to judge of the wants of past times by our own. I don't suppose Hazelrigg's easy ways did any harm. I am not sure that we do not overteach in these days, cram people so much with the ideas of others that they lack room to grow any of their own. Not that I wish to curb your enthusiasm, Crosier."

"No—no, not all. I quite understand. But I really cannot excuse Hazelrigg's absences."

The matter harassed Crosier's soul till the arrival of Mrs. Holt and Esmé Rusholme by the three o'clock train. Fleming entertained his visitors in a little room opening out of the long white drawing-room, and also looking out on the gardens at the back of the Hall. A lawn gay with bright beds of crocus and cyclamen, stretched from under the French windows to a group of beeches. Beyond the beeches rose the Pike, bearing on its slopes terraced walks, warm and sheltered even in winter by reason of the hill protecting from the north and east. This little room was in tones of pinky chestnut, with pale spindle-legged furniture that harmonized with the yellow flower-painted case of the piano. On the walls were a few fine water-colours, and two curi-

ous old mirrors, oval in shape, the frames formed by twisted gilt dragons; some carved book-shelves in one corner; and a high carved chimney-piece, under which a true northern fire blazed in the wide deep grate.

"This is a pretty room," Mrs. Holt observed, approvingly, while she sipped tea out of funny little cups that had come over from Holland long ago. "I recollect your mother having it done up in this colour. It needs more drapery about—embroideries, I mean. No, thank you. I never touch sweet things," this to the Curate, who was nervously skipping about with a cake-basket. "Yes, more embroideries. I always admire the drawing-room at your house, Esmé. You have quite filled it with your own beautiful work."

Esmé certainly had. The Rusholme drawing-room presented the aspect of an Art-Needlework School. She looked up from her tea-cup with a deprecatory air.

"You are very good to praise my small efforts, Mrs. Holt."

"Not small," said Crosier, with timid gallantry. "Miss Rusholme's efforts are never small—nor their results."

Here he gave the basket too much swing, and its contents rolled out on the floor, whereat he blushed violently. Quentin came to his rescue.

"Never mind, Crosier. We will not hang the cake round your neck as a penance. Bran will be glad of it."

"Do you allow that animal in here?" said Mrs. Holt, with surprised severity, as the huge hound rose up from behind a screen, and came forward to the feast.

"Oh, yes, of course. Where I go, my friend usually follows," Quentin laughingly rejoined; "and as, you see, we are neither of us very small, we need plenty of room to orb about."

"Ah, a wife would soon correct all that," putting up her eyeglass, and looking round again.

"I hope not. Love me, love my dog, you know."

Mrs. Holt did not reply to this frivolous remark of her host's. She was thinking that he needed a wife very badly indeed. The folding-doors into the drawing-room were open, and Mrs. Holt perceived that fires were burning in both the fireplaces. Naturally mean, she could never reconcile herself to prodigality in the matter of coal.

"You should not have lighted three fires for us, Quentin," she said, with what was intended to be an amiable smile. She really could not help reproving him for extravagance.

"They are always going," he replied, carelessly—"all the winter at least, and most of the summer, too. I like a place well aired."

Well aired! And of course there would be fires in library and dining-room, and perhaps upstairs also. Mrs. Holt felt that Quentin's fires were like Ralph's gambling—quite a wicked waste of money both. She began calculating how many tons of coal must be used yearly at the Hall, and what a saving in that item alone Esmé Rusholme would effect when she became mistress at Wildersmoor.

"I really think it is time we started. Which way are we going, Quentin?" asked Esmé plaintively. There was nothing to be plaintive about, but she thought a plaintive manner looked well occasionally.

"Any way you like."

"Then I should like to pass the cottages. It is quite a long time since I have been to Wildersmoor, and I naturally take an interest in them."

Fleming did not inquire why Esmé should naturally take an interest in the hamlet; the expression sounded ominous. He agreed readily to her wish, and was grateful to Crosier for immediately beginning a long account of his intention to visit the benighted ones. Possibly the Curate hoped Esmé would offer to assist in the good work. But she did not. She reflected that while she was instructing Wildersmoor with Crosier, Quentin would be in Woffendale, or at Sandhayes. No use wasting energy.

Granny Darlow, sitting with folded hands at her cottage-door, watched the dog-cart and its occupants as it passed. It is curious to reflect how often the thread of our lives is held for a time by men and women scarcely known to us; who, consciously or unconsciously, are the mightiest of friends, the deadliest of enemies. Esmé glanced carelessly at the shrivelled little figure, with its bright black eyes, its crown of snow-white hair. Not once did she dream how daring and reckless a spirit there masked itself as a quiet tidy old woman, a cottager in an obscure hamlet. Nor could Esmé's small soul imagine that the spirit looking out of those black eyes might be watching the play from a better position than her own; might have full view of the stage, and be awaiting the moment to interpose, while she, Esmé, was impatiently catching glimpses from the wings, and trying to be both prompter and self. Esmé did indeed remember that Granny was ancestress of a young woman named Rossela; but

so far as Esmé's knowledge went, Rossela's adventures concerned the past, and it was in the present that Esmé's interests lay. Therefore, Granny Darlow and her grand-daughter did not concern her. Had she known of Rossela's application to Elkanah Fleming, her opinion might have changed. But she did not know.

CHAPTER XIX

AT North Rode Vicarage, Nina Paton—in a discontented frame of mind—was standing by the window, looking down the village street.

"I wonder what has become of Mr. Crosier," she said, glancing over her shoulder at her husband. "He professed himself delighted when I asked him to come this afternoon and show the library to Esmé Rusholme. Yet the train is in and there are no signs of him."

She turned her eyes again to the street, more particularly to the post-office, on the first floor of which were Crosier's modest apartments.

"It must be singularly pleasant and cheerful," she continued pensively, "for a Curate's lodgings to be exactly opposite his Vicar's windows."

"I don't see any objection." Paton said this in a tone of mild surprise.

"Neither do I. Only, were I the afflicted Curate, I should feel an unholy desire to sit with my legs dangling out of the window, smoking a long clay."

"Sometimes, my dear, I positively don't understand you."

"Don't try, dear. No man can understand a woman. The wise man is he who accepts that fact as he does the solar system. Happily I am not a curate, so there is no fear of my sitting with my legs dangling over the sill. I wonder what can have happened to

Mr. Crosier. Surely he has not been 'butchered to make a Bishop's holiday!'—Cyril, that is an improvement on Byron's line."

This time Paton smiled a little.

"I thought you liked the Bishop."

"So I do. Immensely. I am sure if he had lived in mediæval times he would really have tried to convert a heretic before he burnt him. Why, there they are!"—as the dog-cart appeared at the end of the street—"And Mr. Crosier with them. How clever of Mr. Fleming! I could not have believed a man would have had so much sense."

The cottage intended for the library had not needed many alterations. A door had been knocked out here and there, and shelves put up, and painters and paperers were busy.

"How very convenient," said Mrs. Holt, putting up her eyeglass as the Vicar ushered her within, followed by Esmé and Crosier. Mrs. Paton and Quentin lingered in the doorway.

"Where did you meet him?" Nina inquired softly, indicating the Rev. Travis.

"At Woffendale station. He seemed slightly depressed by the episcopal lunch, so I thought Miss Rusholme's society might cheer him."

"Evidently it has done so. He looks positively bacchanalian, so great is his joy. I am glad you are sympathetic, Mr. Fleming."

"I believed I was helping your arrangements, Mrs. Paton," said Quentin; and they both laughed.

"Well, you are. I am sure Mr. Crosier admires Esmé Rusholme immensely, and I am equally sure she is exactly the wife for him. Therefore it is clearly

our duty to give him every chance. What do you suppose Mrs. Holt is saying to my husband? They are both looking so pleased that I am afraid she is recommending some horrid course of study for the women."

"The retort is obvious. You can recommend some horrid course of study for the men."

"Thanks for the idea. I will do so. Or incite Frances Aveland thereunto. Sometimes it is more effective to set another woman to worry one's husband. I wonder if they are coming, by the way;" and Nina stepped back over the threshold to look down the road.

"The Avelands? Do you expect them?" And Nina noted the tone of Fleming's voice, the light in his eyes, as he too looked down the road.

"I told Dr. Aveland he ought to appear, being one of the promoters of this affair," waving her hand comprehensively; "Cyril wanted him, and it would be a real charity to me, as it is so difficult to talk to Mrs. Holt."

Mrs. Holt was enjoying herself immensely, airing her views upon reading, the Vicar listening with interested attention. Mrs. Holt was admirably adapted to be an authority upon the subject; she possessed the inestimable qualification of knowing nothing whatever about it. She read a religious magazine on Sundays, and some scientific work during the week. Women of Mrs. Holt's type frequently choose scientific works for their secular reading. They desire to be fashionable in a serious manner, and as that branch of human weariness makes no demand on either heart or soul, it suits them exactly; giving them a comfortable feel-

ing of superiority over those who prefer Ariel's honey to Caliban's pig-nuts.

Esmé Rusholme, on the contrary, was not enjoying herself. She had not undertaken the journey to hear Crosier's eager explanations of this arrangement and opinion of that. He was very devoted and deferential, certainly, and quite ready to give up any notions of his own in favour of hers. If Fleming had not been within reach, Esmé might have thought seriously of Crosier; the curate caterpillar becomes the butterfly vicar, and as a rule, northern girls smile on the Church. But as things were, Crosier was a nuisance. Esmé had intended inspecting the library with Quentin on one side and Paton on the other. She meant to give the Patons the impression that she was Quentin's fiancée, or would be very soon. Whereas, Crosier was hovering beside her with ostentatious unwelcome devotion, Paton deep in converse with Mrs. Holt, and in the doorway Fleming stood laughing and talking with Mrs. Paton, whom Esmé detested, for no reason save the instinct that feels a foe. What were they laughing at? And why were they looking down the road? The climax of Esmé's discontent was reached, when across her companion's meek babble came cheerful sounds of greeting, and Dr. Aveland's voice saying, "What do you think of the village library, Mrs. Holt?"

Mrs. Holt did not like Dr. Aveland. She had not met him half-a-dozen times, but he was not a Woffendale man, and his daughter might marry Quentin—two excellent reasons for disliking him. It was with an even more wooden countenance than usual, that she replied—

"No doubt it may prove useful."

"Mrs. Holt thinks," said the Vicar, "that not many women will avail themselves of it."

"I imagine they will, relatively to the size of the village. Yet if not, what then? If only one comes, if only one scholarly soul is helped—one empty mind filled and ennobled, surely that would be sufficient reason for keeping up the whole thing."

Aveland smiled as he spoke, but Mrs. Holt did not smile. She put up her eye-glass and inspected Frances with manifest disapproval. They were now all standing in the room intended for the men.

"I had rather thought of that room being used for newspapers only, and a few games—such as chess and backgammon," this hesitatingly from the Vicar, whose mind was somewhat unhinged by his conversation with Mrs. Holt.

Here Fleming interposed—

"I cannot have the women turned out, Paton," he said, good-humouredly, but authoritatively. "If the men want to play games, they must do so in their own room."

Frances, who was standing beside her father, shot a grateful glance at Quentin. "I daresay the men would prefer backgammon to books," she said, eyeing the Vicar from under her long lashes. "It is more natural to them. They have not the thirst for knowledge that women possess. Eve plucked the apple because she desired greater wisdom and fuller life, whereas Adam was apparently content to loaf about with his hands in his pockets."

Mrs. Holt dropped her eyeglass in astonishment; really these Avelands were very queer.

"There is a good deal to be said for that view," remarked Dr. Aveland cheerfully. "Let us hope there will be numbers of equally enterprising Eves to patronize the library. I am afraid there will never be any lack of Adams."

"Perhaps industrious Eves may again induce idle Adams to take a nibble at knowledge now and then," suggested Quentin.

"I think we have seen all," said Mrs. Holt severely. "Shall we go on to the Vicarage now, Mrs. Paton?"

They walked in straggling fashion up the village street, and here chance gave Esmé the opportunity she wished. Some remark of Nina's had drawn the attention of the others for a moment, and Esmé, turning to Frances, whose friendly advances she had hitherto repelled, said with that chill, precise intonation of hers—

"It seems a pity that you should fuss about the library, or anything here, when you will be leaving before long."

Frances looked almost as much surprised as Mrs. Holt had done.

"We are not leaving Sandhayes. We have never had any intention of doing so," she said, with her slow, sweet smile. "We are both fond of the place."

"But of course you will not remain there when you are alone," pursued Esmé. "Quentin said the other day that he supposed you would go to your relations after your father's death."

This was a pure invention of Esmé's, Fleming having never said any such thing.

It was impossible that Frances should not feel a sudden chill at her heart when the dread shadow she so constantly strove to forget was thus brutally pointed

out to her. The rich bloom on her cheek paled for a moment, then returned with a rush, as amazed anger succeeded the chill. It was so extraordinary to Frances Aveland's mind that any presumably civilized being should speak as Esmé spoke. But civilization is rarely more than skin-deep, and cruelty is the most ineradicable of human vices. Between the rough who tramples on his wife, the scientist who galvanizes the ripped-up nerves of living sentient creatures, the woman who beats an infant—between all these there is no difference: the principle is the same; the pleasure in cruelty, the outcome of the inherent belief that might is right. Reverse the cases: make the wife and the infant the stronger, the four-legged animal the more cunning;—how public opinion would then range itself on the side of the former victims! We have no need of devils, so long as man disporteth himself upon the earth.

Esmé had the universal love of cruelty, restrained in her case by her surroundings. Still it was there, and displayed itself in dealing petty stabs, as well as in graver matters. However, the blow aimed at Frances somewhat failed in its effect, for she read in Esmé's eyes that the speech had been designed to vex and irritate, and the knowledge restored her habitual serenity. It was with untroubled voice that she replied—

"I am glad to say my father is in much better health. Of course he varies. To-day he is wonderfully well." There was no opportunity for Esmé to say more. The conversation had become general again. Dr. Aveland's voice—he was walking on in front with Mrs. Holt—came clearly to her unwilling ears—

"You do not read any modern fiction, Mrs. Holt?

Not even newspapers? I was about to say there is a poem of Kipling's—the Galley Slave—which often comes to my mind here. The grim force of it seems to have a sort of affinity with Wildersmoor. I suppose it is because on the moor one gets down to the beginning of things, to the simple tremendous facts of life and death; just as in India there is always the flicker of the sword—whether the sword of steel in the hand of man, or the sword of the pestilence in the hand of the Angel, matters not—there is the sword. Here we forget it, hide it behind bricks and mortar and much speaking. And for want of that warning glitter we sit down and maunder about our sensations when we ought to be up and doing while yet the breath of our life is blowing. In India men do their work as Araunah his threshing—in full view of the Destroying Angel. Better the armed Angel on our threshing-floor than that we should come under the sweep of that sword in our sluggish sleep, like the miserable Assyrian hosts. The Scythians swore by Wind and Sword, by Life and Death. It is an oath I have always admired; and in some odd way, Kipling and Wildersmoor constantly remind me of it."

Mrs. Holt had never heard of the Scythians. In fact, what she did not know would have made a fine library. And she resented, as half-educated people always do, any allusion which she did not understand. In her sight it was a covert insult. Therefore she observed coldly, that she did not consider contemporaries worthy of study."

"Yet Shakespeare was once a contemporary," said Aveland, smiling.

But Mrs. Holt declined further conversation with

this tiresome southerner who spoke of things she knew not, whose thoughts were not her thoughts, and whose deep eyes were so inscrutable. Mrs. Holt instinctively felt those eyes took views of life of which she would not at all approve. As an orthodox Christian she could not rejoice over the probability of a fellow-creature's approaching death; but as an average Christian of the tough-conscienced kind she did derive distinct consolation from the reflection that these Avelands would not long trouble the still waters of her world. She drew the same conclusion that Esmé had done; of course the daughter would leave Sandhayes after the father's death.

Nina's pretty little drawing-room did not prove any pleasanter to Esmé than either the drive or the library. The firelight sparkled cheerily on silver and china, and lit up a face here and there, the others remaining in twilight shadow, for the February day was closing. Dr. Aveland—forsaken by Mrs. Holt, who was talking to Nina—seated himself by Esmé and endeavoured to find some topic of common interest on which to converse. But by this time she was so thoroughly out of temper that she barely replied to him. Crosier, too, meekly attentive to all her wants, met with cold snubbing. She wanted to hear what Frances and the Vicar were saying. They were deep in a discussion, for Paton was mindful of his wife's opinion that one day Frances would be mistress of Wildersmoor, and it was best to be friends all round. Quentin was assisting Mrs. Paton and talking to her and to Mrs. Holt, whereas Esmé had intended exhibiting him as her especial property. Every moment her annoyance increased. She felt he had avoided her, and that some-

how North Rode did not lend itself to her arrangements as Woffendale did; in short, it refused to be arranged, things slipped away from her grasp. She gave up the idea of offering to assist in the Sunday School. She resolved that she would not come to North Rode again until she came as Quentin's wife. Then she would make things unpleasant for Nina, whom she suspected of being at the bottom of the failure of the day's outing.

"It is growing quite dark," said Mrs. Holt, presently. "I think, Quentin, it is time we started homewards."

"As you like, Mrs. Holt. I will see about the dog-cart. By the way, where is it? Have you got it, Mrs. Paton?"

"Really I don't know. Cyril, have we got Mr. Fleming's dog-cart?"

The Vicar looked up from his discussion.

"The dog-cart, my dear? I have not the least notion. I'll go and see."

"I don't think it is at our place," said Dr. Aveland.

"I understood, Quentin," remarked Esmé, icily, "that you had sent the groom on here to take charge of the dog-cart."

"So I did, and he was here all right. But I never thought of telling him where to take it. He would have to decide himself where I should be most likely to turn up."

Quentin felt a malicious pleasure in saying this. Mrs. Holt stiffened visibly.

"I fear we shall be late for dinner. Perhaps we had better take the train here?"

"Oh, I will get you to Wildersmoor station in lots

of time. It would be a pity for you to have the trouble of changing at Riverton. Crosier, will you drive back with us and dine with me?"

The happy Curate accepted joyfully, his gratitude increasing momentarily. Another blissful time beside Esmé, the delight of assisting her at the station, and afterwards a good dinner and pleasant evening with Fleming at the Hall.

"I can put you up if you like," Quentin added, crossing the room and sitting down in the Vicar's vacant chair by Frances. Crosier however explained he had a service at the church in the morning, so was compelled to decline.

"I would take the service for you with pleasure, Mr. Crosier, if it wasn't for that tiresome St. Paul," said Nina, filled with admiration for Quentin's brilliant strategy. "As it is a christening I am sure I could manage it much better than you will."

Crosier was confusedly murmuring something about being "very much obliged," when Paton re-entered with the information that the dog-cart was not on the Vicarage premises, and he had dispatched a boy to Sandhayes in search of the missing trap and groom.

"Smith knows my haunts," said Quentin to Frances.

The remark was overheard by Esmé, whom this afternoon had more than ever determined to act without delay. Quentin might choose to pretend he had not understood her meaning when they walked along the Woffendale road a week ago. He should have no chance of such pretence the next time. Everything that day had combined to exasperate her. Crosier's presence deprived her visit to North Rode of the significance it might otherwise have had; and the prospect

of the return drive—again with the Curate beside her —was a good deal more than Esmé Rusholme's temper could stand. When the missing dog-cart appeared, she got in without the trifling ceremony of bidding good-bye to anybody; being further annoyed by noticing that Fleming did not reprove the groom for the mistake of having gone to Sandhayes. Crosier fussed about arranging rugs; Mrs. Holt expressed to the Vicar a dignified hope that his "well-meant undertaking might do some little good;" and the dog-cart rattled away over the cobbles, bearing at least one radiant countenance, that of the Rev. Travis Crosier.

CHAPTER XX

"IT is evident," said Nina, looking after the retreating dog-cart, "that either my education or Mrs. Holt's has been much neglected. One of us is a savage. I wonder which! Do not go yet, Dr. Aveland. Well, if you must, we will walk a little way with you. I want to grumble at those awful women. How truly thankful Mr. Fleming will be when he gets rid of them at Wildersmoor station! How he will enjoy his dinner, knowing that every minute is taking them further away."

"My dear," remonstrated Paton, diving into the hall for his hat,—they were all standing on the front steps—"Mr. Fleming would not have driven them over unless he liked them."

"Their coming was their own arrangement, entirely," replied Nina. "He told me so himself. Also, he told me neither of them would ever give the library one penny."

The Vicar's face fell.

"I fancied they took an interest in it," he said, "especially as Mr. Fleming of Woffendale was so good as to send a donation. I cannot understand why they came!"

"The reasons, dear, were various; none of them being amiable ones."

"What a prospect for Crosier!" remarked Aveland.

"How can you reconcile it to your conscience, Mrs. Paton, to assist him to such a wife?"

"Oh, Dr. Aveland, Esmé Rusholme will suit him exactly. She is one of those women who agree very well with their husbands and bite their fellow-women. Then the men speak of them as 'sweet,' and marvel that other women do not like them!"

Frances was silently patting her little terrier who had come to look for her, as was his wont when he missed her at home. He had been so deeply absorbed in the contemplation of a rat-hole in the Sandhayes stables that he had not seen his mistress go out. Consequently, after searching the house, Malise had trotted to the Vicarage as the dog-cart left. While the others talked, and the terrier begged for yet more notice, Frances pondered again those words of Esmé's: that Quentin had said she—Frances, would probably leave Sandhayes after her father's death. There is something peculiarly cold-blooded in discussing arrangements that can only come into force after the death of one still living, laughing, moving among his fellow-beings. Anger rose again in Frances' heart and burnt in her cheeks as she looked on her father and recalled Esmé's speech. But her anger was against Esmé, not Quentin. He could not have said it—not in that way. Nothing is easier than to persistently question a person and then to repeat an impatient answer in a very different manner to that in which it was uttered. Thinking thus, and remembering the furtive malevolent expression in Esmé Rusholme's eyes, Frances dismissed the matter from her mind. It was unjust to Quentin to dwell upon it.

"I think," she said, slowly, replying to Nina's re-

mark "that the most trying thing about such people is that one has perpetually to talk down to their level, and even then they are never pleased! In a little while one would be reduced to absolute silence—as you were, father."

She looked at him and laughed.

"I was," he admitted. "The elder lady was offended with me—I don't know why. And the younger lady was offended with everybody—also, I don't know why."

"I will tell you, Dr. Aveland," said Nina. "I am longing for a confidant. Frances dear, kindly take charge of Cyril, and expunge from his mind any erroneous ideas Mrs. Holt may have left there."

And Mrs. Paton walked on with Aveland, leaving the other two to follow them down the village street.

The evening was closing greyly in, lights shone in the cottage windows and through the open doors. True, it was February, but a Wildersmoor February; no need to close doors so early against the soft cool sea-mist that came rolling up over the sand-hills from that dim murmuring line out yonder in the west. So the sturdy fisher-folk lounged by their doors, dark against the glow of fire and candlelight behind them. Only the last cottage was closed and silent, the one that was to be the library.

"It will soon be as bright as the rest," said Frances, looking at it as they passed. "We must certainly have a lending department, for the sake of the women who live on the moor farms, and who cannot be always running to and from the library. What is the matter, Mr. Paton? Do your visitors still trouble you?"

"Well," said the Vicar gloomily, "Mrs. Holt seemed

to think that a small lending library of useful books would meet all the requirements of the neighbourhood, thus freeing that room for papers."

"What are useful books, Mr. Paton?"

"Well—er—," rather taken aback—"domestic matters."

"Cooking and dressmaking? And does Mrs. Holt propose to restrict the men to cooking, tailoring, and farming? Who has a right to say to any human mind, 'Thus far shalt thou go and no further'? And are books that inspire noble thoughts less useful than those which treat of dinner and finery? Not that I despise either. I am very fond of sweetmeats and new gowns, Mr. Paton; but—'the life is more than meat.'"

The moon, rising over the moor, illumined her face as she spoke. Priests are not, as a rule, very amenable to female influence. Their own craving to be worshipped checks any inclination to worship aught save the Divine Being, who can be so conveniently ignored when such ignoring is desirable—put aside on a shelf like an image of Buddha till next pooja-time. Yet even the Vicar was not proof against the witchery of Frances Aveland's smile. He visibly softened, and brightened a little.

"Oh, I am not at all disposed to agree entirely with Mrs. Holt. Besides, Mr. Fleming seems to be much interested in the library, and of course I should feel bound to consult his wishes before those of anyone not belonging to the parish. Only I am naturally desirous to hear various opinions on the subject."

"Then will you hear mine, Mr. Paton?" said Frances, still looking at him in the moonlight with

smiling yet earnest eyes. "Mrs. Holt would make people good by keeping them ignorant. Well, that has been tried ever since the world began, and has signally failed in the majority of instances. I would make people better by wider knowledge. I would give them noble thoughts to fill their minds—old tragedies, 'great griefs of days gone by,' to dwarf their own; and wide —the widest knowledge of good and evil, that they may see that good is good and evil evil—not merely because their teachers say so, but because they are so in the inherent nature of things. I would teach them that saying of our Lord's that never yet has been taught—pardon me, Mr. Paton, but it never has—'By their fruits ye shall know them.' I would show them the fruits of evil that they may know and avoid it. I would teach them that good is Life, and evil, Death—moral, physical, eternal. For I believe with Rabbi Maimonides that the souls of the utterly wicked will perish by their own corruption, even as a diseased body perishes—being unable to stem the sickness which devours it. I do not believe that my soul is necessarily immortal, but only so long as it has enough goodness in itself to overcome—with God's aid—its own evil; just as a body only lives when it has health enough to resist or overcome disease. You shake your head, Mr. Paton, but you cannot prove me wrong. Do not say you are 'troubled with the ghosts of dead ideas' and afraid of the light. Why, in this light lies the solution of the problem you have found so hard to solve—the question of punishment after death. You cannot believe in Purgatory, you shy at the Puritan flames, yet you feel there must be some punishment hereafter, for here the worst crimes generally go unpunished. In

short, you don't know what to say, so you shirk the question. But it seems to me quite simple—'The soul that sinneth, it shall die.' 'What doth it profit a man, if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?' Having given us free-will—the power to slay ourselves, God does not take it away. He cannot prevent us perishing if we will do so, any more than a man can prevent the fire burning his child if that child plays with it. I do not know whether I have made myself understood?—it is somewhat difficult to express clearly one's ideas upon these subjects."

"I perfectly understand your meaning." The Vicar's tone was chilly, his softened mood had vanished, he straightened his back. That a young woman should talk to him in this fashion instead of meekly asking *his* opinions! He would have liked to administer a severe snub, but there was Dr. Aveland: when father and daughter are attached to each other, it is not advisable to attack the daughter; wait till the father is dead, then you can trample to your heart's content. Also, there was Quentin Fleming. Nina might be right; certainly he had shown no deference to Mrs. Holt's ideas that afternoon. All things considered, it was best not to reprove Frances too harshly for youthful presumption; and the Vicar was really kind-hearted, so he contented himself with saying—

"I perfectly understand your meaning. It is a pity, however, that at your age you should attempt to grapple with matters quite beyond you; especially as you seem to ignore the fact of pardon being promised on repentance."

"Oh, no, I do not. I fully believe in the saving power of repentance—that is the recovery from sick-

ness. The punishment then will be the regret felt for the wrongs done that no repentance can undo:—

'If we fall in the race, though we win,
The hoof-slide is marked on the course;
Though Allah and Earth pardon sin,
Remaineth for ever remorse!'

That is why I should like to make people better—to save them from the remorse that must be theirs hereafter, even if they do repent in time. I am so very sorry, Mr. Paton, when I think how terrible that remorse will be. I should like to help to save a few from it. I am sure if you think about it you will agree with me."

Paton was positively growing angry. He didn't exactly know what to say; he was not accustomed to this type of woman. His wife could have taught him much, but he did not wish to learn. He glanced at his companion's face; it was beautiful and serene as always, and that serenity annoyed him. How like she was to her father! Aveland had that same level, weighing, appraising gaze—not keen, but reflective—a gaze that looked not merely at the outward semblance, but thoughtfully sought to read the soul. It was odd how that same thoughtful gaze seemed to possess the quality of Ithuriel's spear. Beneath it people became more vivid, either for good or evil. A strong personality invariably acts as a disintegrating force. There is a turmoil wherever it appears, other forces disentangle themselves and range on opposite sides. Hence the storms that usually rage round strong characters, both in life and after death.

The Vicar was distinctly angry. He was the more

angry because he recognized the futility of argument or snubbing. It was useless to argue with either Frances or her father. It was equally useless to attempt to ignore them. They were like the rising tide, which only recoils to advance. Not that Paton actually disapproved of anything Frances had said. He merely disapproved of her having anything to say. Occasionally he felt a little uncertain as to what really were his own ideas, but he was quite sure that the laity—and particularly a young woman—had no right to be more grounded and settled than he was himself.

"I think," he said, with emphasis, "that the North Rode library will manage to get along without your so unnecessarily harassing yourself."

"Ah," rejoined Frances, tranquilly, "when you have lived longer on Wildersmoor, Mr. Paton, you will understand how one is impelled, as it were, to look round and reflect. There is something in the grey stillness that lays a finger on your lips and sets your mind working. Really, we cannot help it, and you will soon get used to us."

This assurance did not tranquilize the Vicar, though it was intended to do so. However, they had reached the Sandhayes gates, where Nina and Aveland were standing by the clipped yews—teapot and boat both looming gigantic in the misty light.

"How I love those funny old clipped trees," Nina was saying. "No, thank you, Dr. Aveland, I am sure we cannot stay to dinner. Can we, Cyril?"

"I am afraid not. I am expecting one of my churchwardens this evening."

"Then we shall see you to-morrow."

On the way home, the Vicar gave his wife a brief

summary of the conversation between Frances and himself.

"Goodness me, Cyril! You mean to say you quarrelled with her! The idea of a man walking with a handsome woman and quarrelling with her! Fortunately, she will not quarrel with you. Frances never quarrels with anybody. She merely sticks to her own opinions and goes straight on. What was it about? —partly the library? Oh well, you know you were vexed by that tiresome woman Mrs. Holt, coming worrying here and never giving anything. Did I not tell you those women were only coming to make mischief?—here it is already! However, it does not matter. Frances will not quarrel, as I have said before."

"Mrs. Holt may give something yet," Paton interrupted. "Miss Rusholme has influence there, and she is interested in Church work."

Nina gasped with despairing indignation:

"Now do not tell me, Cyril, that you are still worshipping your fetish, Esmé! Believe me, you will never get anything, either for the library or the schools, through Esmé Rusholme. How blind you men are to be taken in by these mincing images! 'Good,' do you say? No, she is not good, any more than a wasp is good. She may be moral—I'm sure I don't know. But Torquemada was extremely moral. The only man among you with any discernment is that charming scamp, Jack Ulyett. He hated Esmé. He understood her. I wish he were here now; he was a real ally. 'Gambler,' was he? So I have heard—and I don't care. He was an attractive, kindly gambler, anyway. Now Ralph Fleming was a repulsive one. There is the difference."

"My dear, I never heard any good of Jack Ulyett."

"Neither did I. I wish he were here now that I might tell him so! I should be delighted to see him coming along with that smiling, half-deprecating air, like a dog hoping for a bone; then valiantly drinking at least ten cups of tea, and telling me all the news of Woffendale, and begging for all the news of North Rode in return. I am sure you ought to be quite fond of him, Cyril, considering how deferential he always was to the Church, as represented by you and Travis Crosier. Yes," continued Nina, meditatively, "poor Jack had the rare merit of knowing himself to be worthless, and of appreciating the consequent situation."

"I don't see that Ulyett has anything to do with the present situation," said the Vicar. He had not been listening particularly.

"Neither do I. Yet one cannot tell, for he always struck me as being one of those wandering atoms that tumble into the scale unexpectedly. But to return to this afternoon—now do listen, Cyril. As I have already said twice, Frances will not quarrel; but it is not the least use either arguing with or opposing her. She only pauses, and then takes fresh hold. And Quentin Fleming will do anything she wishes," added Nina, significantly.

"It is all very annoying," said Paton testily.

His wife only laughed, and the Vicar began to cheer up and to think that perhaps it was all Mrs. Holt's fault after all.

Yet if he still secretly preferred Esmé Rusholme to Frances Aveland, who can blame him? The preference was natural. She taught in the Sunday School, de-

ferred to the Vicar's opinions, and possessed absolutely no gifts or ideas whatever. Ignorant?—yes, but ignorance is not displeasing; rather the reverse, for obvious reasons. Cruel?—well, people do not mind cruelty so long as they themselves are not the victims. Besides, so long as motives are good, actions cannot possibly matter; and Esmé's motives were always excellent. No wonder the Vicar sighed as he pictured the Millennium that might be if Esmé—not Frances—reigned over Wildersmoor.

His dreams that night showed him Quentin Fleming with two wives, and himself distractedly striving to conciliate both.

CHAPTER XXI

SPRING was always late on Wildersmoor. It had a trick of seeming to come in February, with soft warmth and scattering of celandines like largesse of gold coin. Then with the blossoming of the blackthorn would follow the blackthorn winter—bitter winds and driving sleet; while the natives stolidly warmed themselves at huge fires, and talked of bygone springs, warmer and bluer, when fogs were few and drifting smoke unknown.

One chilly April evening, when the white silky willow-catkins were bursting into bloom—a sign that winter was drawing off his forces preparatory to a general retreat—a workman turned into the Grey Wolf.

"Stranger?" said Vose, interrogatively, signing to William to bring the beer ordered.

"Nay," returned the man, "I'm a Woffendale chap born an' bred. Gleave's my name—Sam Gleave. But I've been a matter o' seven year down Driffield way."

"Ay, I see. I thowt I didna know thee."

"I dunno as I've ever been on Wildersmoor either," continued Gleave, "sin' I wur a lad, an' my owd grandam sent me out wi' th' teetotals on Whit Monday. Th' owd lass wur mad fur me to join 'em, but I never wur one o' them red-hot uns. It never seemt to me as a mon wur cut out fur tea-drinking. It dunnot seem to fit reet somehow. Not but what I've drunk

many a gallon o' tea when I wur courting a lass a while back; but that wur love, and it didna seem to disagree. It's when a mon cooms to take tea with his church-going that it turns him up loike."

"Ay," assented Vose with an approving nod, "it do. I've tried it mysen, though tha mightn't believe me, an' I dunnot hold wi' it. Art tha going far to-neet?"

"I'm bound fur Woffendale. I did well enow in Driffield, but I didna loike th' folks. I fair pined to get whoam to th' owd town. I stood it fur seven year fur th' sake o' th' wage. However, at last I says to mysen as I couldna bide theer longer, so I just clapped my savings i' my breeches pocket, an' my tools i' th' bag, an' coom along. I meant to ha' gone straight through to Woffendale, but somehow I got into the wrong train, an' coom to North Rode. So I've had th' walk o'er Wildersmoor. I'll see Mr. Quentin Fleming to-morrow. I reckon he'll give me a job. He knows me well enow, does Mr. Quentin. Many's th' time I've gone fishing wi' him when he wur a lad, an' I wur boy in buttons at owd Elkanah's."

"I make no doubt he'll give thee a job," said Vose. "He's th' reet soart, is Mr. Quentin. He's giving th' yearly play-acting to-neet o'er at th' Hall. Tha con see fro' th' door how it's a' lit up. I'm going up theer mysen by-an'-by. Being a tenant, Mr. Quentin asked me hissen, an' told me to bring a friend if I'd a moind. Happen tha'd loike to coom?"

"Thank ye, I'd loike it rarely, if theer's a dark corner as I con set in. I hannot getten my Sunday clothes, tha sees."

"That's all reet," said Vose. "Step into th' Snug,

an' ha' a smoke. Theer's one or two chaps theer, Blind John among 'em. Happen tha knows him?"

"I've heard tell on him. Th' chap as found Mr. Ralph Fleming that neet."

Vose nodded, and Gleave betook himself to the little sanded parlour, where Vose introduced him as a Woffendale man, and the company made room for him before the fire, that was nearly as large as the one blazing in the bar. For the season mattered little; Wildersmoor folk had fires all the year round, and if you needed a fire, why of course you needed a good one. To express a preference for small fires was conclusive evidence that you came from "foreign parts," and you were viewed with distrust accordingly. The mental attitude displayed by a stranger towards the hearth was regarded as a test of social position. Did he appreciate a noble blaze, and bask contentedly in its light and heat, as one accustomed to worship at its shrine? then there was a fair presumption that he came of decent folk who had duly reverenced the household gods. If, on the contrary, he disdained the ruddy glow, or sneaked up to it like some poor homeless cur, grave suspicion attached to him and his unknown belongings. So that when Gleave drew up an empty chair with an air of decision, settled himself in it, filling his pipe, and leaning back with a half-sigh, half-grunt of contentment, the grunt was sympathetically echoed by the company, as expressing a general feeling of good-fellowship towards him.

This was, on Wildersmoor, the most courteous way of intimating that the stranger's society was welcome, and that any remark he might choose to make would be received with respect. In such situations, a grunt,

it may be observed, has considerable advantage over words. It does not demand a reply; and obviously, there is more politeness in leaving a man in peace for a few moments, than in disturbing him to talk before his pipe is fairly under way and his thoughts smoothed out. Therefore it was etiquette on Wildersmoor for the stranger to speak first.

Gleave and his companions smoked a minute or two in silence. Then he said—

"I'd loike to hear a bit o' news, chaps. I've been away i' Driffield nigh on seven year, and seen nobbut save i' th' papers. To be sure, I see Mr. Ralph Fleming now an' then when he came o'er on business, an' fur th' shooting—ay, fur th' shooting," Gleave repeated reflectively, with a slight shake of the head, as though there was much to be said about that same shooting.

"Mr. Ralph wurna much," observed one man, adding apologetically, "though, to be sure, he wur murdered."

"Ay, he wur," said Gleave; "but theer wur rare doings at that theer shooting-box," and he shook his head again. "I wur friendly wi' one o' th' keepers, an' he asked me if I'd loike to coom o'er an' take a look at th' place. So I went one Sunday, an' a bit o' a fire broke out that afternoon i' th' stables. Mr. Ralph wur away, but me an' keepers fettled it. When it wur o'er, th' missis coom out an' give us summat fur our trouble. Hoo wurna a lady, but hoo wur a good-looking lass, wi' black hair an' rosy cheeks. I wur thanking her when hoo says to me, quick-like, 'Tha mun be fro' Lancashire?' 'Ay,' I says, 'I'm a Woffendale chap, thank th' Lord!' Wi' that hoo says

hoo wur a Wildersmoor lass, an' begins to ask me about a' th' folk. But, theer! I couldna tell her owt, fur I'd been in Driffield more'n six year, an' hoo hadn't been more'n two."

"A Wildersmoor lass?" repeated the man who had before spoken, "it mun ha' been Rossela Darlow. Hoo's th' only lass hereabouts as has left th' place. An' what tha says fits her, fur hoo had black hair an' rosy cheeks. But her grandam says hoo's in service i' Lunnon. Hoo went nigh on two year ago. When did tha see her?"

"It wur i' November," replied Gleave, "but hoo wurna i' service," he added significantly.

"I'll be bound it wur Rossela," said Blind John suddenly. He had been listening attentively to the conversation. "I never did think owt o' that lass. Look at her owd grandam—th' owd besom! Hoo redds up well enow fur me, an' I ha' nowt to say agen her cooking, but eh dear!—theer's tales o' her young days as 'ud make a body's hair stond on end!"

"Tha'rt reet theer," commented another.

"An' if hoo wur nobbut young again," pursued John, "theer isna owt as that owd lass wouldna be up to! An' I'll warrant th' young un is noan so mooch better. Would tha' know her again?" to Gleave.

"Th' lass?—ay, o' course."

"Well, tha'rt safe to see Rossela if tha stays hereabouts. Them soart allus drift back."

"I shall bide in Woffendale, sure enow," responded Gleave. "I've had my filling o' foreign parts. Neither th' lads nor th' lasses wur owt to depend upon. I'd courted a lass off an' on fur three year, when one

Sunday I see her walking along wi' a Driffield chap's arm round her waist. So I went up an' says, 'Here, I conna put up wi' this. It's him or me. Make up thy moind.' Hoo tosses her head an' says 'Hoo isna going to wed a Lancashire clog;' did yo' ever!" looking round for the sympathy which was instantly accorded. "I says, 'A' reet, I'll take thee at thy word. But I'll punse this chap's head fur him afore I go.' Wi' that I give him a black eye, an' he give me another, an' we had a pretty rough toime fur about a minute an' a half, when I give him one as landed him in th' gutter, an' theer I left him. 'Tha's killed him!' says th' lass. 'Nay,' I says, 'I've nobbut spoiled his Sunday cloas,' an' I walked off. Eh!—I wanted no more foreign parts after that! I just coom whoam an' I'll stay whoam."

"Theer's nowt like it," said one of Gleave's audience. "Theer's allus summat interesting whoam, an' theer's nowt a mon cares about elsewheer. Tha'll see owd Elkanah's new placards all o'er th' town. He's keeping it up! He's offering seven hundred pound now instead o' five."

"Tha hannot found the chap yet?" said Gleave, turning to Blind John. "Seven hundred pound would set thee up, loike."

It seemed to be tacitly acknowledged that a blind man might earn blood-money without incurring the usual odium attached to it.

"Ay, it would that," said John, "an' I'll get it yet. I'd swear to that chap anywheer if ever I coom across him. An' somehow I think as I shall happen on him one o' these days."

"I shouldna wonder. It's queer how one cooms across folk."

Here Vose spoke from the doorway.

"I reckon it's about toime to think o' going to the Hall."

CHAPTER XXII

THE play of which Vose spoke was an annual entertainment at the Hall—usually a dramatic one—to which gentle and simple alike were bidden. Originally there had been a tenant's ball, but the elder Fleming—Quentin's father—tried the experiment of putting up a temporary stage in a large barn and presenting Hamlet with Elizabethan simplicity as regards accessories, engaging a Woffendale theatrical company.

The change gave Wildersmoor so much gratification, affording it subject for literary conversation for a year, that the experiment became a settled thing; and Macbeth, Winter's Tale, Marlowe's Faust, and the Duchess of Malfy successively appeared. The morals of Wildersmoor did not permit the dwellers there to frequent the Woffendale theatres, but the drama at the Hall was a different matter. And the plays selected appealed to Wildersmoor sympathies.

"I'll try them with the Agamemnon and the Antigone one of these days," Nicholas Fleming had said. "I believe the classics would suit them all round."

But that day did not come, and Quentin this year inclined towards more cheerful drama. He selected the Merchant of Venice—not without a thought of a stately maiden at Sandhayes who had much in common with Bellario's pupil.

So to-night when the April twilight fell there flowed

a continuous stream of guests of all ranks to the old Hall. It is easier in country places for all classes to mix than in large towns, there is greater simplicity and more good feeling. Gleave, Vose, Granny Darlow, and Blind John—the last three in their best clothes—set off together. Granny and John were, by grace of Quentin, privileged to do a little gleaning after supper,—Granny because she was old and a widow, John because he was blind.

The four walked on in the April starlight, Blind John's stick steadily tapping the ground. Even with companions he preferred to find his way after his own fashion. He turned his face to the moor.

"'Tis a clear night," he said.

"Ay, clear enow," responded Vose.

"I'll be glad to ha' a sight o' Mr. Quentin," Gleave observed. "It's a matter o' four year sin' I set eyes on him. I'll warrant he hasna grown less."

"He's a fine big gentleman," said John. "I wonder he hasna got wed afore now. But theer, it's little slim nesh chaps that most women loikes."

"Tha knows a deal about women, doan't tha?" retorted Granny, scornfully. "I reckon when th' Almighty created Eve He mun h' taken a sight o' Adam's brains along wi' Adam's rib, fur th' most o' thee menfolk arena more nor half-theer. Thee con see th' bottom o' a beer-mug sharp enow, an' that's about as fur as thee *con* see."

"If tha says as it wur three parts o' Adam's tongue as wur took fur Eve, I mout agree wi' thee," replied John with slow sarcasm.

"I wouldna say o'er mooch about that if I wur thee," said the old woman sharply; "th' biggest gossip

o' a woman is nowt to thee men when thèe gets together at th' beerhouse, an' tha knows it. Thee con shut thee mouths tight enow when tha 'rt whoam, but when tha 'rt a-setting smoking o'er theer, thee oppens 'em wide enow fur to swally th' moor."

John felt slightly uncomfortable. Granny had an uncanny reputation; could she by some occult means have become aware of the conversation in the Snug an hour previously? He hastily changed the subject. It was not advisable to offend "th' owd witch," for there was no one else in the hamlet to "redd up" and cook for him, and did she not concoct wondrous ointments for rheumatic limbs?

"Eh, dear!" he said, "to think as it's five month sin' I found Mr. Ralph o'er theer on th' moor."

"Ay," said Granny, "tha hannot yet caught th' chap tha guided to North Rode fur a' tha made so sure on it."

"Thee womenkind are allus in such a hurry fur everything," retorted John. "If yo' could ha' your own way, we'd ha' had th' Judgment Day th' week after th' Flood."

"An' if yo' men could ha' things as yo' please, we'd never ha' any Judgment Day at all, fur th' most o' thee ha' good reason fur not wanting it."

"Theer's owd Elkanah," said Vose, as a carriage passed them.

"Eh, we mun be quick!" and John hastened his pace. These grand doings at the Hall would furnish him with conversation that would interest both his cronies at the Wolf and his clients on the moor. He trusted to his companions for descriptions of looks and dress—whether so-and-so resembled his or her

parents and grandparents. While as for picking up gossip, he could trust his own ears to serve him well.

Granny Darlow had other reasons for going. She had not to keep up the reputation of a raconteur. What she saw and heard sank into her own mind and remained there. She went because she had a great admiration of Quentin Fleming, and took a very deep interest in the drama of his life. Indeed, she was by no means sure that she would not take a part in it herself. She held herself in readiness should he need assistance—how or when she could not tell. But like a dog, she kept a watch on him and on all around him, prepared to rush to his defence if need be.

Presently she ensconced herself in the dark corner of a passage leading out of the flower-decked hall. Here, herself unseen, Granny watched the perpetual movement of guests in and out of the long white drawing-room, with the singers at the farther end. Quentin had invited the members of the Woffendale Glee and Madrigal Union, and they had joyfully availed themselves of the opportunity to exhibit their undoubted talent while the actors were getting ready. Granny's nook also commanded the hall-door, and each arrival was noted by her with interest. There was a tolerable sprinkling of strangers, for a learned society had made Woffendale its head-quarters that week, and the savants were very willing to accept an invitation which promised a fairly amusing evening, with a good supper at the end. Fleming had accordingly asked most of them—not all. But for strangers Granny cared little. They were nothing to her. She came to look at the people she knew—the people in whom she was interested. For the mimic drama pre-

paring in the barn she felt a slight contempt. It was the drama of life she studied—the drama in which she herself had played so strong a part. She came to look at the people whom she knew. Standing motionless in the shadow, she saw them pass and re-pass before her in the light and brightness and colour of the scene. Fleming himself was often in sight. Granny watched his greeting of the Avelands, her keen old eyes resting admiringly on Frances as she stood—a tall white figure in a gown of some glistening stuff, beside a bank of red azaleas. Then Aveland himself, with his bright eyes and delicate dark face, sharpened by illness. Then McKie, gaunt and jovial; Travis Crosier; the Patons, Nina, in a pink frock—her pretty fair hair a mass of tiny curls. "A most unsuitable coiffure for a clergyman's wife," Mrs. Holt was heard to remark to Mrs. Rusholme. Esmé and her mother had just returned from a six weeks' visit to Bournemouth—an enforced absence from Woffendale that had not pleased Esmé. But Mrs. Rusholme made a rule of always going away in spring, and Isabel had protested she really could not give up Harry Haslam's society for so long a period.

Therefore to-night was Esmé's first meeting with Quentin since that afternoon at North Rode, and she meant to make the most of it. It was, however, more difficult to speak to him alone than she had anticipated; he was so much occupied with his guests. A bachelor host has double duty to perform, and the interval of arrival needs to be well managed to escape dulness. In this instance the interval went cheerfully enough. People thought they ought to listen to the glees, therefore they were inclined to talk. They drifted into the

library, where there was coffee; thence into the drawing-room, listening a little; and finally settled into groups in the hall, discussing this and that; while Celia's lachrymose lover explained his wishes to the river-god, or Mynheer van Dunck trolled forth his opinions upon the question of alcoholic refreshment. Certainly, the hall was an attractive lounging place; softly, darkly carpeted, gay with flowers, and warmed by the great fire blazing in the wide fireplace; as it always blazed from September till June, for Wildersmoor held no delusions as to spring temperature.

"I am sadly in need of an astral body," said Quentin, addressing a good-looking grey-haired woman in a steel-coloured gown—a member of the learned society that was just then shining on Woffendale. "I desire to be in two places at once, and to talk to all my guests at the same moment."

"I am afraid an astral body would not help you, Mr. Fleming, for your spirit cannot inhabit both bodies at once, any more than it can serve two masters. Your earthly garment would lie helpless and inert while the astral was disporting itself elsewhere."

"Then I give up the idea. I imagined my duality would prove useful to an embarrassed bachelor anxious to do his best."

"But why a bachelor?"

"I am not married. Did you think I was?"

"Oh no, I was told there was no Mrs. Fleming. Besides, it is easy to see you are a bachelor. You would not be so positive about everything if you were married."

"Is that a sign of single misery?"

"Certainly. We are pliable before marriage, men

after. How I should like to attach you to our party. Do you remember our political argument at the Bishop's dinner last week? If you were to choose a wife from among us——!" regarding him reflectively.

Fleming laughed. "I find it a little difficult to attach myself to any party. The word politics 'surprises by himself,' more than ever in these days. Besides, I always look on the other side of the shield."

"Ah, you are one of the few who think for themselves. Everybody pretends to think, but the majority merely echo the opinions of their friends or of their pet papers; and in so doing lose what little individuality they may once have had. I hope you will make no mistake when you marry. It would be a thousand pities."

"I shall not do that."

"That answer tells me you have chosen already. I shall be very curious to see your wife."

"I shall be delighted to introduce you to her when you come again."

"The Society meets at Driffield next year, I believe. That is not very far away. We all think it so good of you to invite so many of us. By the way, did you know the celebrated Professor Blank is one of us?"

"Yes, but I have old-fashioned notions of hospitality. I do not ask a man to my house unless I can welcome him, and as I do not approve of animal torture, I cannot extend a welcoming hand to a vivisector."

"Really?—of course, if you feel like that you are right. How you surprise me, Mr. Fleming."

"Do I? Once we tortured the human animal in deference to the opinions of judges and priests. Now

we torture other animals in deference to the opinions of doctors and scientists. I fail to see that the latter have any more right to insist on legalized torture than had the former; and cruelty remains cruelty, no matter what the intentions of the person inflicting it."

"Now I wish more than ever that I could persuade you to join us. What an ally you would be! You seem so much in earnest."

"That," he replied lightly, "is the result of living on Wildersmoor. We are like the ptarmigan, we take colour from our surroundings."

"I understand. I have seen both Woffendale and Wildersmoor—the Titan at work and the Titan at rest."

"Yes. All wild tracts of country are apt to produce men and women with convictions. McKie there, is a Galloway man, and he has convictions of the calibre of an eighty-ton gun. I think I see someone beckoning to me. This is one of the occasions when I desire to be in two places at once."

He moved away into the library, and Mrs. Holt observed vaguely to her brother-in-law, that "she could not imagine where Quentin got such ideas. No doubt he would lose them as he grew older."

"I think the lad is right," said Elkanah, bluntly. "I don't concern myself about such matters, but if a man has got any opinions, let him stick to 'em."

"I am rather surprised Fleming does not show more feeling for science," lisped a young fellow with a receding chin and spectacles.

"Better let science begin to show feeling," growled McKie—he had pricked up his ears like a terrier at the sight of a rat's nose—"six or seven thousand

dogs and cats being flayed, roasted, baked, disembowelled, artificially ulcerated, galvanized on ripped-up nerves, in all the laboratories of Christendom! Oh ay, science is a grand thing to respect!"

"Pray don't, Dr. McKie. You really make one feel quite ill!" Mrs. Holt hated McKie, and in making this remark she knew she would have sympathizers; in fact, a little murmur of assent did follow her words.

"Ye don't like to hear the truth," said McKie sturdily. "Ye don't mind such things existing—ye'll not raise a finger to stop or check them—but ye don't like to be disturbed by the hearing of them. I don't doubt that was the feeling of the priest and the Levite. The wounded man wad be a gruesome sight, dusty and bloody, and a sair trouble to any that would fash themselves with the helping of him. So they just let him lie there, which was verra natural and according to human nature. The creatures must writhe out of your sight, and then ye welcome their torturers to your table. Natheless, never a creature writhes out of the sight of the Lord that made it, and ye all—men and women alike—will hae to listen at the Judgment Day, and to answer for your passive share in the ineequity: 'As ye have done it unto the least of one of these, ye have done it unto Me.'"

"But, Dr. McKie," said the young man with the receding chin, "do you really mean to say you believe in that nursery bugbear, the Last Judgment?"

"Assuredly!"—McKie was the grimmest of Presbyterians, and would have gone to the stake in support of his opinions—"assuredly! And I wad say to unbelievers, that since nae man can tell what comes after death, it's weel to be on the right side—to gie

the poorest reason for belief. It's aye easy for these smirking torturers with their sonsie incomes to deny the God above—and weel they may, for they daurna face Him. But denial proves naething but their boundless egotism. For the rest of ye, I was about to say ye echo the cry of Cain when ye turn a deaf ear to the sufferings of the puir beasts. Ye say ye are not their keepers. Weel—weel, it's a grand comfort to me that ye'll hae to repeat that before the Lord. I ken weel what ye are thinking—I am auld and ahint the times. That's as it may be. It's my ain opinion that I'm before the times—which is anither matter. Ay, before the times—these times when ye can blaspheme your Redeemer and deny your Maker, and get the applause of the fashionable world whiles ye do it, but ye daurna say a word against yon animal-torturers. These be your gods, O Israel! There is neither Heaven nor Hell—there is neither Father, Son, nor Holy Spirit! But there is the Devil ye call Science for your worship, and there are the writhing beasts for your offerings; and ye say the work of your day is good—verra good in your sight!"

McKie stopped, and the notes of "Aileen Aroon" floated out from the drawing-room. Whether a burn from hot or cold iron is the more severe depends upon the skin of the individual burnt; but it is pretty safe to say that the burn from cold iron makes the stronger impression on the mind. It gives such an idea of staying power. For we know the red-hot glow will die, and rapidly too. Whereas the cold iron burns by reason of its coldness—and still burns and burns—and who can tell the duration of the frost? A North Briton of the Covenanter type is very cold iron indeed. He

is never heated nor flurried. He knows exactly what he is going to say, and he says it; and whether his personality be an agreeable one or not, there is no denying that it *is* a personality. Therefore McKie impressed his audience at least with the force of his dogged sincerity, if not with the justice of his opinions. Rusholme, that old Pict—feeling who can tell what faint stirrings of comradeship from those far-off days when Pict and Scot fought side by side, and the falcon's flight marked out the lands of Hay—Rusholme nodded approval; and the grey-haired woman, perceiving that here was another energetic individual, slipped into a vacant chair by McKie, and with much tact and pleasant appreciation endeavoured to ascertain his political leanings.

Only, while conversation rose again, the spectacled youth objected.

"Rather—er—bad form to make such a fuss here, eh?" he observed.

"Everything steadfast is bad form now-a-days," said Aveland. "The correct thing is to possess a mind as supple as an acrobat's back."

Standing near the spectacled one was another young fellow—a civil engineer, and at Aveland's reply, he laughed appreciatively, his white teeth and bright black eyes lighting up his swarthy face. He was strongly built and rugged of feature; by no means handsome, yet very pleasant to look upon; full of the life and energy, and with the eyes of a faithful dog.

"I always back up old McKie," he said, turning to Frances, whom he greatly admired, only—as he put it to himself—it was easy to see that Fleming was first

favourite; "he's the sort of man you feel sure of, isn't he?"

Whereupon Frances was very gracious to the civil engineer, which cheered his soul and he talked on, the northern burr sounding in his speech, melodious though it was: a fine type this young fellow; one of the best the north offers. Four months later he was slain by fever, and buried in a hot West Indian island; whence, doubtless, his spirit fled home to grey cool Lancashire, and walked the wet familiar streets, and heard again the soft broad-vowelled speech that had been his own.

CHAPTER XXIII

ESMÉ RUSHOLME never felt the smallest interest in anything that did not directly concern herself, otherwise she might have noted the picturesqueness of the mingled audience that presently flowed down the gaily-decorated temporary passage to the transformed barn.

Not that the building had lost its barn character. On the contrary, Fleming had preserved that by leaving the rough brown walls and roof untouched. The arrangements were purposely primitive. The actors entered only by the wings. At the back of the stage was a little painted scenery. That was all. The playbills, however, were dainty works of art—the whole play, with delicate illustrations. Quentin had spent thought and money on these, knowing that his poorer guests would cherish them. And it was noticeable how the bronzed fishermen and burly farmers and their wives appreciated the feeling which had provided those fairy books. Old Will Elliot was there, dirty as ever; but with clean hands and face, and a smart new coat. Gleave, conscious of his working clothes, modestly squeezed into a top corner near Vose, who had Blind John beside him. Granny found a vacant chair behind "th' gentry," close to Farmer Blackshaw and his wife. The latter, a buxom smiling dame, looked askance at Granny, and wondered audibly to her husband, how

"the owd witch had the face to show herself among respectable folk!"

"Let-a be, let-a be," said Farmer Blackshaw, with masculine tolerance of impropriety, "happen it wurna exactly as folks tell it. An' it's many a year ago—afore thou an' I wur born. See theer, th' curtain's going up!"

The Merchant of Venice suited the audience exactly. Portia supplied the intellectual element, Antonio the commercial. His losses by shipwreck appealed to the fisher-folk, who were of opinion that Portia had better have married him instead of Bassanio. Whereas most of the landsmen thought Antonio "nobbut a fool, for a wee laddie could ha' seen what owd Shylock wur up to!" But all agreed that "Portia wur a grand lass," and one or two matrons meditated bestowing her name on their next daughter.

When the last scene opened in the moonlit garden at Belmont, Fleming quietly went out, with the intention of inspecting the supper-room before taking his guests thither. Surmising this, Esmé slipped out too. But she did not follow him through the temporary passage from the barn to the house. That passage ended in the conservatory opening from the dining-room; and Esmé, knowing the place, took a short cut across a lawn into the house, and was sitting in a basket chair by a group of palms before Quentin entered the conservatory from the passage. She knew this would be her only chance of seeing him alone that evening. Living as she did in Woffendale, it was difficult to get an opportunity of speaking on that subject from which he had partially escaped that night at Elkanah Fleming's, in the winter. He should not

escape this time, she thought, as she heard his approaching footsteps echoing along the passage.

And Granny Darlow? Of course Granny had seen Quentin go out, and Esmé, and equally of course, Granny had also made a quiet exit, following the latter. She watched Esmé seat herself in the corner by the palms; then saw Fleming enter from the passage, walking quickly, evidently going straight through. His surprise, when Esmé rose and confronted him, was clearly observed by Granny.

"Th' impident besom!" she muttered, "waiting theer fur a mon as wouldna wait for *her*."

But the old woman could not hear what was said, and the annoyance visible in Quentin's face determined his human watch-dog to be effectively present at the interview. Outside the conservatory corner was a clump of laurels, dark in the April starlight. Here among the leaves stood Granny. Above her head a small pane of glass was open, thus every word spoken within became audible to the listener without.

"It was not Ralph—I never cared for Ralph." This in Esmé's precise metallic tones.

"Pardon me if I do not understand you, Esmé"—this in Fleming's voice. Then more lightly—"Will you come with me to the supper-room? In my character as hostess I am bound to see that all's well before, as host, I give the signal to fall to."

"You understand me perfectly well, Quentin," with unmistakable anger; "your affectation of ignorance is mere pretence. You have understood ever since we dined at your uncle's."

"I hope not," gravely.

Esmé laughed, a low unpleasant laugh.

"You owe me reparation even by your own showing. You say you believe I loved Ralph. Very well, who prevented me marrying him?"

"Not I, Esmé."

"Yes, you. And you bribed my cousin, Jack Ulyett, not to tell what he saw that night on the moor—you bribed him with a thousand pounds. But I can compel him to speak if I choose; and whether I do or not depends on yourself."

Her anger seemed to have vanished. She was speaking with cold insistence.

"I never bribed your cousin. What wild tale you may have got in your head I cannot imagine. What do you suppose Ulyett to have seen?"

Fleming spoke with equal coldness.

Outside, Granny listened intently. She had known all along that Ulyett was on the moor that night, and had guessed he must have been the man whom Blind John guided. But Granny had kept this knowledge to herself, and Elkanah had questioned her in vain.

There was a short pause before Esmé's next words floated through the open pane. In truth, Quentin's direct challenge had slightly discomposed her. She felt positive that he was Ralph's murderer, and that Ulyett had witnessed the crime and made capital out of it. Yet Esmé experienced a difficulty in charging Fleming to his face with having killed his relative. Had he appeared dismayed, despairing, she would have trampled hard. But he was cold, unmoved. A doubt crossed her mind. Could she be mistaken? Then she reassured herself; she had confidence in her own conclusions.

"You gave Jack a thousand pounds," she said, a slight uncertainty betraying itself in her voice.

"Lent it. Certainly. But who told you, or why Ulyett's money matters should so excite you, I don't know."

Another short silence. Then Esmé spoke again, a little hesitatingly.

"I heard Jack had stolen that money."

"Did you? Pleasant for Jack!"

"I mean, someone else's money; and you enabled him to replace it. Of course you would not do that for nothing. You must not think I should betray you, Quentin."

"It seems to me that you are betraying Ulyett—if you have any real grounds for your assertions respecting the poor fellow."

"Never mind Jack. He is not likely to come back, unless I send for him. Would you like me to send for him?"

"That is your concern."

"No, it is not; it is yours. It's no use pretending unconsciousness, Quentin. You need Jack's silence, and you have paid him for it. But you cannot tell how long it will last. You are no relative of Jack's. Besides, you owe me reparation, as I have said. If Ralph had lived, I should have married him."

"Ten minutes ago you told me you did not like Ralph."

"I should have married him to please my mother. I have never thought of my own feelings. Dear mother's wishes are sacred to me, and she always wished me to marry a Fleming."

Which statement was an ingenious perversion of

Mrs. Rusholme's natural hope that her pet daughter would marry a rich man. Outside among the laurels, Granny muttered vigorous comments in her native Doric. The affected modesty of Esmé's voice, the well-acted faltering and final sigh, all worked up the old woman to a heart-warming pitch of solid exasperation. Scant shrift would Esmé have met at Granny's hands could she—like Abou Hassan—have been absolute ruler for one day. She crept closer to the glass. Fleming was speaking gravely.

"I never bribed Ulyett. I had no reason for doing so. As for reparation, I owe you none. It is mere childishness to say so. With regard to your mother's wishes, Ralph is gone—and I cannot think you would have been happy with him had he lived. There is a good man who loves you—Travis Crosier, a thoroughly good fellow. He will make you a better husband than my cousin would have done. For myself, if I marry—I do not know that I shall marry—but if I do, my choice is already made."

"You mean Frances Aveland. You cannot marry into any strange family. You must marry to ensure silence. Otherwise I shall not feel under any obligation to keep silence. You cannot bribe me, Quentin, as you did Jack."

Esmé's words were very deliberately uttered, and in the metallic tone which always became more accentuated when she felt particularly vindictive towards the individual she was addressing.

"I am sorry that you take such an extraordinary view of a very simple act of friendliness. And I am also sorry, Esmé, that this conversation seems to have become the reverse of pleasant to either of us. Let us

agree to forget it. Can I take you anywhere? Or do you prefer to be left here. I am afraid I cannot spare any more time from my guests."

"I have no wish to keep you from them, though you appear to forget that I am one. Leave me here. I have no more to say. You have your choice, and you have plenty of time to think over it. If you marry Frances Aveland I shall not consider myself bound to silence."

There was no more said after this.

Granny heard Fleming's footsteps passing out of the conservatory down the passage. A soft April air blew from the moor, a few sleepy birds twittered. The darkness was not the dense horrible darkness of houses built by hands, but a dim starlit blueness—a sort of owl's noonday, in which trees and shrubs and winding pathway were faintly visible. A quiet friendly darkness—more friendly than any human home and warmer in its kindliness than any human hearth. Indoors may be good—outdoors is generally better. Granny slipped back through the laurels on to the path beyond and thence into the house again. Crossing the passage by the conservatory door, herself in shadow, she saw Esmé standing alone by the palms; and the look on Esmé's face boded ill to Quentin Fleming.

CHAPTER XXIV

FLEMING'S guests might have been fairies, so quaint and varied were the vehicles in which they departed, and of shapes utterly unknown elsewhere. Pumpkin-like covered waggons, spider-like gigs, and queer little low cars with a contrivance for supporting a huge umbrella—the whole speeding over the moor like an animated mushroom.

The Avelands had an old-fashioned hooded phaeton, with a fat shaggy brown pony, and an almost equally shaggy coachman and general factotum, called Peter, as thin as the pony was fat. Peter considered it due to his master's dignity to start off with prodigious dash and rattle. Once fairly outside the Hall gates and out on the moor, old Peter drove at a steady jog-trot and gave the occupants of the phaeton ample time to study the landscape as it drifted past them. To-night it was a weird misty landscape in silver grey with blurred shadows, no sharpness anywhere. A light not clear nor dark; earth and air one soft shimmer of mist and moonlight. The sandhills were more silver than grey, the moor more grey than silver; each and all melting—elusive. It might not have been earth at all, but some dim lunar world whence all realities had vanished, leaving only their ghosts. The silence added to this feeling of illusion—of remoteness. The phaeton wheels made no sound on the sandy peat of the track. Once a curlew screamed. Then the shining

mist seemed to close round again after its severance by the bird's cry—to close into wellnigh absolute stillness; save for a faint tremor hardly to be called a sound—the pulsing of the sea.

"This is Northern magic," said Aveland as he and his daughter were carried softly onward without effort of their own through that eerie landscape, so familiar—so transfigured; "Northern magic," he repeated. "I am no lover of the north myself, yet I recognize its witchery under certain aspects. Such a night makes the Norse faith natural. Anything might take shape and form from this mist. Odin and his ravens—the Valkyrie! You would make a good Valkyria yourself, Frances."

"Should I, father? The moor reminds me of Pierre Loti. It often does."

"You are right. I had not thought of him. Yes, it is the same landscape as the Breton—the same feeling. The bare greyness, the sea-mists, the subtle charm of mystery and restraint. Odd that the most delicate Ariel-like genius seems to need—firstly, a long line of dour Puritan ancestors; secondly, a chill sea coast for a cradle. I have sometimes thought there is a certain resemblance between the writings of Loti and Hawthorne, with their respective Puritan and Huguenot ancestry. Of course Hawthorne is the stronger, but the likeness is there. The same limpid clearness, though dealing with things mist-like and strange, and coloured with the colours of dark rock and barren sand and luminous air. The same insight, the same tenderness for helpless creatures—this last most marked in Loti. And also, both equally give the impression of restrained force, as does that soft lapping of the tide

that we hear. It is only the soft grey tide—and no man can tell what it may do." Aveland paused. There came through the silence a measured beating sound that grew more distinct.

"What is that? A horse?"

Frances leant forward from under the hood as her father spoke, and looked back into the thin silvery haze that seemed to part and close up and follow them; thickening over a stunted oak till the tree seemed clothed with ghostly shimmering foliage; drawing away behind a willow clump till every leafless branch could be seen defined against the pale mist crouching beyond, like an outcast soul—a wavering, moonlit haze, in which a horseman loomed gigantic, all outlines blurred and shifting.

"There is someone riding behind us," said Frances. "Quentin must be too busy to leave the Hall to-night, yet the rider looks like him, and the horse like Marigold. The mist is so confusing that I cannot see clearly."

"Doubtless it is Odin. He is on his way to Heligoland, where his horse will be shod by Master Olaf, the smith."

Though Aveland spoke thus jestingly, his heart gave a bound; so anxious was he—this dying father—to leave his child's future less uncertain. If Fleming, after seeing his guests depart, could take a night ride of fourteen miles, merely for the sake of trotting half that distance beside the Sandhayes phaeton, why, surely——?

"It *is* Quentin," said Frances, "and here is Bran!" as the great hound bounded up.

"I hope you have not imagined me a highwayman,"

said Fleming, checking his horse to a trot beside them. "When I had seen my last guest fairly outside my gates, I felt the need of a little exercise. So I started in pursuit of you."

"Father took you for Odin. It is a great disappointment."

"Is it? I am so sorry!"

"And we are in pursuit of the Patons," Frances continued. "We are supposed to be going home with them. Of course we shall not overtake them. We never overtake anybody. They are about two miles ahead, and are likely to remain so, as they have borrowed Farmer Blackshaw's mule. How can we, with merely a pony, compete with a mule!"

"Blackshaw's mule!—but why in the world——?"

"Oh, their horse is lame, that is why. Did you not see the mule as they drove up? It is a very smart animal—much smarter than our own shaggy friend," with a nod towards the plodding Sandhayes pony.

"Anyone can drive a smart animal," Aveland observed meditatively. "Only a philosopher or a saint would sit behind a cinnamon bear."

"It is a good little beast," said Fleming.

"Thank you, Quentin. When a man makes a statement like that I appreciate the friendship which dictates it."

"Well," rejoined Quentin, laughing, "I was admiring the pony's moral qualities."

"He has the soul of a Bayard," said Frances.

"Therefore the mule is ahead of him," said her father.

"Does it matter?" Frances asked, in the slow, clear tones so like her father's. "Being ahead does not

always mean getting the best of things. 'The gods sell their gifts at a fair price.' If one lingers by the way, one has leisure to look around. Bayard is in the right. Let the mule go ahead!"

"That is what I should have said in my youth. Now I feel an unreasonable desire to apply a stick to the mule, merely because it *is* a mule. Curious how one's natural savagery survives!"

"My natural savagery seems in abeyance just now," said Quentin, restraining Marigold's inclination to set off like the wind—for what was the moor made if not to gallop over? "I wish to linger, to prolong the moment," this more particularly to Frances. "Do you remember that fellow in Browning who thought Heaven might be one long ride at sunset? This moonlight does just as well."

They talked on. Aveland leaning back among his wrappings and listening—hoping—watching the slow eddying of the moon mist into dim shapes that peopled the moor with phantoms of Briton and Roman, Pict and Dane, whose feet had trodden it long ago. April though it was, the hall at Sandhayes retained its winter cheerfulness, the red firelight warming its whiteness—the dull whiteness of the stone floors, the walls—dark panelled below, white above up to the dark rafters; the two house-friends, Malise and Ptolemy, basking on the white rug before the fire.

"You will come in, Quentin?" Aveland had said. "I know no reason why a man should welcome his friends only at certain hours. A call paid at one in the morning has at least the merit of escaping monotony."

"I am not sure of that," Fleming replied, entering nevertheless. "I should say that the monotony or

otherwise of the visit would depend a good deal on the fellow paying it. However, natural perversity usually impels a man to be more lively after midnight just because he ought to be asleep."

"Why ought?"—Frances took off her cloak and went to a side-table; "Quentin, I think that little kettle is boiling. Please bring it here, I am going to make some coffee. Why should we lose every night? The stormy ones, perhaps; but the starry and the warm ones? I always sympathize with that friend of De Quincey's whom he found sitting in his garden after midnight—not 'sunning,' but 'mooning' himself. Why should we not moon ourselves occasionally?"

"Rheumatism," suggested Aveland, taking his coffee from his daughter's hand, and patting Bran; the dog having come in with his master as a matter of course.

"I do my mooning best on horseback," said Fleming. "A night ride is a capital thing."

How pleasant it all was! The wide white hall with its dark fittings; the singing fire; the basking dogs; the murmur of the sea without; the delicate aroma of coffee, bringing a thought of the hot East into the chill North; the mingled simplicity and culture, characteristic of Sandhayes under the Aveland rule. The pity that it could not last!—that all things, good or bad, drift away towards change; and the best things go the quickest when their foundation is that frailest one, human life. The fair peace of Sandhayes rested on Aveland's life. When he went, the spirit of the homestead must needs depart also; must become a memory, instead of a joy. Many happy memories had Aveland prepared for his child—memories like a string of

jewels, each with its own distinct beauty. This day would be one—a happy day from dawn to close.

When Marigold's head was turned homewards, and the silence of sleep settled over Sandhayes, Frances—in her own room—stood for a moment looking into the scarlet depths of the fire that flamed so cheerily in the wide northern grate. Then she drew aside the curtains from the window and threw it open, admitting the damp sweetness of the April night. Without, the moor stretched dimly—whitely, the silvery vapour lying on it; a glimmering veil through which the yet leafless boughs—misshapen by the mist—pointed like fingers downward and onward: downward to the dark pools—in which of them lay the bones of Granny Darlow's husband?—onward to the spot where Ralph Fleming died. And downward and onward to many a spot where hemlock had grown tall and rank, and blossomed and withered year after year above dead men, if all the grim legends of Wildersmoor were true. If not, whence did they arise? Doubtless they were true.

But when one is young, and one's own life drama is unfolding, one's mind is not greatly occupied with thoughts of bygone generations. The living fill the stage. Frances looked out of her warm, bright room over the dark moorland, feeling a vague soft contentment with everything. This was home. Not merely the house; but the familiar earth around, the familiar sea purring to itself over there in the night—all giving that sense of friendly shelter extended over long years, which belongs only to the first home—the home of one's childhood.

The mist was not so dense as it had been an hour

ago. It seemed to be lifting. The moist, warm airs faintly breathing from the sea brought out the characteristic odours of Wildersmoor, the dry, curious scent of dead bracken mingling with the fresh earthliness of springing moss. As the scent rose, incense-like, Frances remembered hearing of a dying sailor, a Wildersmoor man, who—being desperately ill—was sent ashore near Sandhayes, and prayed his bearers to lay him down for a moment by the roadside, saying he "Couldna die easy without a smell o' the moss." Not far away was the patch of emerald velvet that had been his death-bed—a more wonderful couch than any made with hands.

Overhead, a dark rift appeared, a space of deep violet sky, into which sailed a moon of vivid silver, lighting up sea and land. How beautiful it all was! The more beautiful because there was no shadow on the girl's soul to dim that beauty. She rose from her leaning attitude, listened to the church clock striking slowly—the light wind brought the sound from the village. Marigold and his master would be home by this. Frances closed the window with a smile on her face, drew the heavy curtains, and turned with a little shiver from the mystery and glory without to the warmth of the dancing fire, that babbled neither of death nor of change, but only of the fair commonplaces of home.

CHAPTER XXV

BUT nothing happened as yet. May passed with its sheets of blue hyacinth in the copses, and on the moor the moss grew and embroidered itself with tiny white and yellow blossoms; and satin-flowers and rose-a-rubies shot up to keep the tall ferns company—soon to be overshadowed by them. By the brown pools, hemlock spread its leaves—there was much hemlock on Wildersmoor; while from every thicket and bush, from willow and hazel and stunted oak, those feather-clad spirits we call birds, sang matins and evensong with lusty throats and joyous hearts, so happy were they—so unmolested. There were never many people needing to cross the moor, and the most of these kept to the main tracks. Only Granny Darlow and Blind John wandered along bypaths, and women are seldom scourges to any but their own kind. Granny was as harmless to the winged and four-footed natives as though she were disembodied; and, as for John, the creatures knew well they had no need to flee in terror from a blind man. What a new era of happiness would dawn for our poor fellow-spirits, were the whole human race stricken blind. They have no foes so dire as we.

But the returning summer brought no return of health to Aveland. He had rapidly become worse. By the middle of June he rarely went further than his own garden. From the porch to the clipped yews and

back again, was now his customary walk. Sometimes not even that. Day by day he grew more fragile-looking, more transparent; and day by day the troubled shadow deepened on his daughter's face. She could not disguise from herself how swift was his journeying away from this familiar earth. Fleming perpetually sent over from the Hall everything he could imagine that would tempt a failing appetite, and followed himself; but then he could hardly appear at Sandhayes more often than he had been in the habit of doing. McKie was constantly stepping out of the train at North Rode, or driving over with Quentin; not that any check could be put on the ebbing life, but McKie's attachment to Aveland drew him—though uselessly. Nina Paton came from the Vicarage with a smiling face, and laughed and chattered. Then went home and wept, exclaiming against the perversity of things.

"Dr. Aveland is the one adorable man I have ever seen," she said, with a sob and a sniff. "Excuse me saying this, Cyril. And to think that he should go when so many worthless ones cumber the earth!"

"We must resign ourselves," said Paton, thoughtfully. He was really sorry about Aveland.

"Don't say that, Cyril, please. People always say that to anyone who is troubled in heart, and I call it taking a mean advantage of one's sorrowful, and therefore, defenceless condition. Just say it to a man who has tipped off his bicycle into a ditch, and see what he will reply!"

The Vicar gazed reflectively out of the window at the post-office and Crosier's lodgings. He was not paying much attention to his wife's remarks.

"Aveland is a little difficult to approach," he ob-

served presently, "I mean in serious matters. I have been at Sandhayes pretty often lately, but have had no opportunity of speaking to him on other than every-day topics."

"Do you think he needs speaking to? He sees you constantly. If he wishes for any spiritual advice he will surely ask for it."

"True," Paton spoke a little reluctantly. Then he added more briskly, "I may as well go there now. Probably I shall find Aveland alone. Fleming generally turns up about six, doesn't he?"

"Sometimes earlier. It depends on whether he is staying to dinner or not."

"Anyway, I'll go down now. I meant to have looked in yesterday, but Crosier's absence kept me busy. They are alone, are they not?"

"They were when I left, an hour ago."

June on Wildersmoor had not the riotous summer heat and luxuriance of more southern places. There was a sort of repression about it. The sunshine was a softened gold, the pale blue of the sky had a faint haze in it. The spring green was darkening, though here and there the cuckoo lingered.

There was one calling in the larch wood at the back of Sandhayes, as the Vicar turned in at the gates between the clipped yews. There seemed to be a hush about the place—a hush not of peace, but of expectancy.

Dr. Aveland was lying in an easy-chair in the dining-room, by the window looking out on the moor. Quentin Fleming usually came that way, and in these last days Aveland's thoughts dwelt on him more than ever.

"Is your father well enough to see me, or do we give you too much of us?" asked Paton, when Frances met him in the hall.

She answered the latter part of his remark first.

"You know we are always glad to see either or both of you. Nina told us you might possibly appear later. Father, here is Mr. Paton."

"Tell me all the news of the village, Paton," said Aveland, as his visitor entered. "There is something peculiarly soothing in village news. Which man has grown the biggest lettuce or the most alluring cabbage? Whose children have let the family pig into their neighbour's garden? And with what results? It is the best possible news for a sick man—unless the villagers are his tenants."

"I don't know that there is much civil war going on at present," rejoined the Vicar. "We have settled the little difficulty between the Brierleys; I daresay you heard that from my wife."

The conversation drifted on from one subject to another. By-and-by Frances left the two together. Her father seemed well amused, and the little larch wood behind the house was full of cool air and summer sun. In these days Frances did not wander about the moor as she used to do. The last weeks of Aveland's life were too precious to his daughter to be spent away from him. Now and then, when a friend was with him, she would go into the wood, striving to gain strength and calmness from sunlight and sea wind—from strong-growing trees and happy living things. Sitting on a rustic bench in the chequered light and shadow, Frances thought much and deeply, being confronted by that which quickest cowes and kills—the

sense of powerlessness. Meanwhile, in the dining-room, conversation had taken a graver turn, and an opportunity had been given Paton to observe that if he "could be of any service in his priestly capacity——"

"Thank you, no." Aveland's eyes rested on his companion with a quiet smiling light in their depths. "For the one thing that troubles me—the leaving my only child—you could not give me consolation. For the rest, I need no consolation—I am glad to go. I have no sins to confess. I have never repented of anything, save of my amiable impulses—those pearls of conciliation that I have cast before swine. Content yourself, Paton, I die in the faith of the Trinity—the oldest faith in the world; the original ancient faith, of which all other forms of religion are offshoots. In Asia—in India, you can see its traces in the old, old books, in the present habits and beliefs of the people. Why does the Indian woman wash out her water-jar in three jerks? There was the faith of the Trinity in old Egypt, almost lost—as in India—among fantastic star-worship and tutelary gods; so corrupted that Moses saw no way out of the maze of idolatry but by teaching the Trinity in its unity—as the one God Jehovah; precisely as Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees and rejected all save the One God, both of them acting—as you and I believe—under Divine guidance. The restoration of the ancient faith in its fulness was too great a task for man; it needed the Second Person of the Trinity. Not till Christ appeared was the old faith taught once more in its purity."

"I am willing to admit," said Paton, dubiously, "that the ancient nations may have had some dim

illumination; yet I can hardly go as far as you. For instance, Mahomedanism is no offshoot of the true faith of the Trinity."

"I think it is. It was a revolt of the human mind against the corruptions that had crept into the Trinitarian belief—a revolt similar to that of Moses. Mahomed looked round at the multitude of gods—many of them were blocks of meteoric stone, like the Kaaba at Mecca—and turned for relief to the Unity of the Trinity—the one God, whom he called Allah, and whom Moses called Jehovah. But the Arab camel-driver was not a man of either the natural powers or the education of Moses—whom, by the way, he doubtless imitated. Neither had he any especial command from the Almighty. Consequently, he grafted a lot of fantastic lies on to his real and true idea of the one God. But I believe the man to have been sincere, as far as his capacity went. Afterwards his success did its usual work, and he bequeathed vice, war, and misery—and that deliberately—instead of peace and conciliation. Nowadays we are witnessing the same falling away from the faith and the same results—a drifting to monotheism on the one hand and to superstitious beliefs and multitudinous gods on the other; to Buddhism, to Theosophy, to a hankering after the classic gods. I should not be in the least surprised to hear of a revival of the cult of Isis or Dionysus. But this is more your affair than mine, Paton. I am passing away from it all. Rest assured there is nothing new under the sun. The brutalities of science, its so-called discoveries—all are old forms of cruelty, old theories, old inventions. Nothing is new save railways. Those we moderns have truly invented. All else is old. Every

modern form of thought has been anticipated, every phase of belief and disbelief has been experienced long —long ago. For me, content yourself; I die in the oldest faith in the world—the faith of the Three that, later, took its clearest form in Christ—and these Three are One."

Paton did not immediately reply. He didn't exactly know what to say. These just persons who need no repentance, whose belief is clear and unassailable, whose ingrain independence of spirit compels them to get over the gates themselves, instead of waiting for an orthodox introduction to St. Peter, are eminently trying to the professional mind. We all know there is more joy in heaven over a repentant sinner and undoubtedly there is also much more satisfaction upon earth. Paton felt a very natural annoyance; and Aveland—a man of keen intuition—perfectly understood the Vicar's frame of mind, and derived therefrom much internal amusement.

"Though I do not need your teaching," he resumed after a minute's silence, "I have not said that I do not need your friendship."

The Vicar's slight ill-humour vanished at these words, and he clasped the transparent hand held out to him.

"If I can do anything——"

"For me, no. But I am leaving my child. If, when I am gone, she should at any time need a friend?"

"I shall be only too happy to be of assistance. My wife, you know, is devoted to your daughter."

"Yes. I do not know a woman in whom I have greater faith than in Mrs. Paton. I am sure her friend-

ship will not change. But I should like to hedge Frances about with friends—if I could."

There was a touch of hopelessness in Aveland's voice. No one knew better than he the terrible uncertainty of all things in this transitory life. Paton opened his mouth to make fresh assurances—very honest assurances too, when Fleming came in. Aveland's face brightened at the sight of him.

"I did not hear your horse, Quentin?"

"I came by train, as I had to see a man in Riverton. How are you, Paton? Is Mrs. Paton here?"

"No, she is at home, where I ought to be," said the Vicar, rising.

"Till to-morrow then?" said Aveland, inquiringly.

"I will come to-morrow," replied Paton. "What time suits you best?"

"Any time after one. We are expecting McKie in the evening."

The Vicar made a wry face. He did not in the least intend to do so, but the face was made before his sense of propriety awoke and controlled the muscles. Fleming saw the grimace and laughed.

"You would like McKie if you knew him better."

"Oh, I fully admit Dr. McKie's many fine qualities. Perhaps I might admire his 'swashing blows' more if they did not so often fall on us poor maligned parsons."

"I'll tell him so. I've been trying to cool him down as to the Church—sprinkle him with holy water as it were—for the last ten years. But his Presbyterianism fizzes up worse than ever."

"He is a free lance," muttered Aveland, "and the worst of it is, he is generally right!"

But it is doubtful whether the Vicar heard these last words.

In the larch wood Frances still sat thinking of many things, and Malise lay at her feet and pricked his ears at the moving shadows. Presently the little dog sprang up with a welcoming bark and much tail-wagging. Fleming was coming through the chequered light and shade, the sunshine behind him lighting up his uncovered head. Truly he was goodly to look upon, and Frances Aveland thought so as she watched his approach.

"I did not know you were here," she said. "Have you seen father? Mr. Paton is with him. I knew the Vicar would feel happier if I were not glowering at him, so I retired hither."

"What is his latest atrocity?"

"Mr. Paton's? Nothing. We have been the best of friends for quite six weeks. I should really like him immensely if he did not expect me to defer to his opinions when I expect him to defer to mine. In short, the perpetual rock ahead of us is that he wants me to minister to his vanity, whereas I want him to minister to mine. You perceive it is the usual whine of human nature. But he has not ruffled my vanity lately, or I should have set you to worry him."

"I am always ready to act as bulldog. Now am I not?"

He was leaning forward as he sat at the other end of the rustic bench, lazily pulling his moustache, his right elbow resting on his knee. As he spoke, he turned and met Frances' eyes with a glance so smiling, radiant, yet humbly questioning, that the answering colour flashed into her face. There was a momen-

tary silence. A light seabreeze whispered in the trees overhead, a thrush was singing in an old hawthorn near the house, the warm sun drew out the resinous scent of the pines. The little terrier, sleeping on the mossy ground, his tail touching the tip of his mistress' shoe and his nose the side of Fleming's boot, hunted rabbits in his dreams and whined impatiently. Quentin was about to speak—checked himself, stooped and patted Malise. Then Frances said,

"Have you seen Dr. McKie to-day? What does he say of father?"

Fleming seemed to pull himself together. It was with an evident effort that he replied—

"I met him at Woffendale station this morning. He did not appear to think Dr. Aveland any worse," meeting her gaze again and speaking cheerily. "McKie doesn't consider it necessary to come twice a day, you know."

"Not necessary, because useless. Is it not so? I think you are evading my question."

"I am. I beg your pardon. Evasion is miserable meanness at the best. Would you like some other opinion? I will send for any doctor—for all the doctors in London if you wish. I could get three or four down to-morrow if you will tell me whom you would like."

This reckless offer brought a smile to the delicately-curved lips.

"Thank you. You are very good. But it would be of no use."

"Do you think I would not do it? Try me."

"I am sure you would. I only meant that father would not wish to see them."

She paused a moment, thinking how powerful, and yet how powerless, was money. With Quentin aiding, she could summon to Sandhayes every healing agent known to civilization; and what then? Money had but the limited power of the Genie of the Ring in the Eastern story. He could bring much, bestow much; yet the restoration of the Fairy Palace was beyond his capacity. All the wealth of the young man beside her was hers to command, but the earthly dwelling of her father's soul was crumbling day by day, and the Genie who only commanded gold could not stay its falling walls.

Gold might have stayed them sooner, though. Like most good things, the Genie came too late. There is always food to be had when the starving man is past eating; always warmth when the chill of death is on the body; always peace when the spirit no longer needs it.

"If father were not himself a doctor," Frances went on, "he might perhaps wish to hear other opinions. But he has his own opinions, you see."

"Still, if it would be any comfort to you?"

She shook her head.

"I don't think it would, thank you. I believe too much in father and Dr. McKie to take comfort from any stranger's ideas."

"I think he is better to-day," said Quentin.

"Do you? I fancied so myself. But the improvement never lasts."

She rose to her feet, and the little terrier rose also with a prodigious yawn, glancing from one to the other to ascertain their intentions. Were they going together?

"Must we go in? This is one of the oases we talked about on the moor. Let us stay in it."

He looked up at her as he still sat on the bench, and Frances saw in his face that mingling of conflicting feeling—of some thought restraining speech, that had now and again puzzled her during the last few months.

"If father were not walking in the desert," she replied gravely. "Besides," with a quick change of manner and a little laugh, "I am sure it is dinner-time. Everything gives way to dinner."

"Everything!" acquiesced Fleming, getting up. "Scott was wrong when he made love the ruler of the world. It isn't. It's dinner. No matter what a civilized man may be doing, he obeys the dinner summons. The only free soul is the artist. He makes dinner wait; thereby proving the divinity of Art. Even the Church respects the dinner hour and arranges its services accordingly."

Frances laughed.

"The Church is not respecting the dinner hour to-day. I know the Patons dine earlier than we do."

"Oh, Paton went home ten minutes ago. I saw him off the premises."

"Then father is alone!" Frances quickened her steps.

"Dr. Aveland said he wished to write one or two letters before dinner," explained Fleming.

Perhaps Aveland had wished to give the young man that brief interview in the fir wood. He was not writing when they joined him, but was idly turning over the leaves of a book. As they came in he looked

up with a faint inquiry—a hope in his eyes—a hope that died almost instantly, leaving a vague trouble. The sands of his life were running so swiftly; and Quentin had not spoken.

CHAPTER XXVI

IT was not a sad dinner. Aveland exerted himself to talk, and Quentin was always a good companion. Seeing her father animated, Frances too brightened. Surely, he must be better! So the conversation flowed lightly on, serious subjects being tacitly avoided —the great shadow was too near.

But when Frances had left the two men alone, the smile died out of Aveland's eyes. He leant back in his chair, and said, with the abruptness that betrays serious thought upon the matter:

"Quentin, there is something in human nature that compels a man to make a dying speech if possible. The tightest mouth uncloses, the slowest tongue wags, when a man knows he is facing the curtain. Silence is often imposed by circumstances on the most voluble of us; but when we see our order of release dated and signed, the desire of loquacity comes over us, and we pour out all the pent-up thoughts, feelings, and wishes that have been clamouring for utterance so long. All which brings me to what I was going to say—to the beginning of it, rather. Quentin, you are very lucky in knowing nothing of poverty—real poverty—for that is knowledge which is not good."

"Cash is useful," responded Fleming, as his host paused, "but——"

"Yes, I know what you would say; and you are right. There is much it cannot buy. It will not give

a man what Paton calls a 'sool'—have you noticed his peculiar pronunciation of that word? Nevertheless, the absolute want of it is apt to cause extremely unpleasant results, both immediate and later. I know, as I sit here to-night, that I shall not live a week; and I know with equal certainty that I die—at fifty-two—of useless privation in the past. I am a slain man, when I might have lived to old age—lived to enjoy name and fame, had I possessed but just enough to keep body and soul together in the days of my struggle with want. The curse of poverty kills slowly, like an insidious disease. People who have not starved—actually starved with slow, semi-starvation for years—don't know what they are talking about when they patter glibly about 'endurance,' and 'bracing effect,' and so on. The utmost squalor of the lower classes has nothing to be compared with the wasting torture of the well-born, refined genius—whether male or female—under that iron pressure. First your health dies, then your buoyancy, then your enjoyment of life, lastly your capacity for action—all withered, blasted by the fell atmosphere of worry and despair that your poverty compels you to breathe. And the reason that these things die in you is because of the continual checking of healthy impulses. You have friends; you would like to see them. But no, your clothes are shabby; you cannot go to their houses. You have not enough to eat; how can you entertain? And by-and-by you cease to care. Then your ambitions—your God-given ambition to use the God-given gift within you—that too you must crush, for poverty does not suffer you to choose that phase of your profession most congenial to you. You must work at precisely

that which will bring in your wretched half-loaf; and your starved brain writhes at its unwelcome work, and your whole soul frets. By-and-by that goes too —the fret, I mean—and you begin dying. You no longer care for all—for anything that makes life more than a mere vegetable existence. You are not even an animal, for an animal—when not tortured by the accursed beast called man—is happy, riotously happy, over and over again. But you are a withering herb; your animal spirits, your intellectual cravings are dead, killed of necessity by the repression to which they have been subjected; and the miserable life that yet flickers in you is no more than a dull wonder, and a stunned wish for annihilation."

Aveland paused a moment, and his listener felt a pang of shame that this man should have so suffered for want of what he himself had had in such abundance that he never even thought of it.

"If I had known," he began, "if my father had known——"

"Yes," resumed Aveland, "I know what you would say. But your father never knew. One likes to keep one or two of one's friends in ignorance of the depth of one's humiliations. Your father believed in me. It was that for which I felt grateful. We had not met for years till I came down here, and he thought my health had kept me poor and obscure. I never told him my health had been good till those years of starvation. Most people smile derisively if one still maintains that if one had a chance one could prove one's capacity. The usual reply is that if you have capacity you will rise; your remaining at the bottom, or thereabouts, is a sure proof that you are a conceited fool.

It is best to say nothing. What use to point out that this man had powerful friends, that man a private income which kept him from the bitter need that has slain your dearest, and worse than murdered you? It is no use. The well-fed smile, and think it cannot be much hardship to go without a few luxuries. It never occurs to them that you may have to go without necessaries. Besides, there is a very general idea that the brain-worker ought to thrive on poverty. If you are clever—or think you are—why, you must expect to be poor; and it is your own fault if you remain so. The idea is, as you perceive, a singular muddle, but there is no doubt that it dwells in serene confusion in the minds of most well-fed human beings, especially when they are the relatives of the man or woman on whom God has bestowed the many-coloured robe of genius. Most of us have to remain in the pit into which our loving brethren hasten to cast us, or in the hands of the Midianites unto whom they sell us. And we are murdered, slowly murdered, by those who refuse us the trifling aid we need; who tell us to make bricks without straw; who send us ragged and starving on a campaign that taxes the strength of the best-fed and best-equipped soldier. Well did the old Rabbis say that those who had suffered from poverty should never see hell. And why? Because they had seen it already, endured it, passed through it. Do you remember De Quincey's account of his own sufferings by starvation? He was a Lancashire man, by the way. You don't make enough of him—a delicate spirit, a most sympathetic and honourable gentleman! Do you recall his confession of the humiliating pain it cost him to pass a bread-shop with its smell of hot

loaves? When I read that, I feel he is my brother indeed. There is a bread-shop at the corner of a street that has cost me agonies of bodily longing and mental fury at the humiliation of that sick hunger. By God!" cried Aveland, with sudden passion, "I feel it still! That is a memory which lasts. Whatever else one forgets, one does not forget the hunger-pinch—nor those who caused it."

He leant back in his chair exhausted; the dark red flush on his face fading, leaving him of the whiteness of the sea-pebbles bleached by stress of storm—even as he.

Fleming poured him out some wine. He drank it, and resumed:

"This seems a peaceful haven in which to end my days; it has never been peaceful to me. Had the better luck, the trifling ease come earlier—come in time, before I had lost my wife and while I was yet hopeful—I think I could have been a very happy man, for I was naturally light-hearted. But it came too late. I am deeply thankful, for my child's sake, that it did come. With the little I shall leave her she will have a sufficiency, as far as one can foresee the future; and Sandhayes is hers. She never knew her parents' poverty. As you know, my wife's cousin—one of those much-scoffed-at spinsters with hearts of gold—had the child here during our darkest days. Frances has no idea of what I am telling you now. But in this quiet haven I have ever tossed in spirit on the terrible seas that wrecked me. If I had to advise one entering life I would say—pray to care for nothing but yourself. Your own privations you may somehow endure, your own disappointments you may overcome, but the pri-

vations of those dearest to you blast your very soul. I have seen my wife ill, and have not had money wherewith to buy the food and wine that would have kept her in life. She died of privation. For that sort of thing nothing can compensate. When it is over, you are dead. For you the blue is gone from the sky and the green from the trees. People chatter glibly of endurance—those who have never had anything to endure. There are some things beyond endurance. Priests say hereafter will compensate. I am a Christian, but I doubt it. When your soul has been thus ground into the dust of life's highway, that dust is in your eyes and in your mouth, and on your spirit for evermore."

Fleming, from the depths of his respect and liking for Dr. Aveland, felt a rush of generous compassion. What must not this man have endured, or seen others endure, ere he could speak with such truth and bitterness? And feeling that sympathy in words would be jarring and useless, Quentin stretched out his hand—a strong, young, beautifully-shaped hand; the elder man laid his thin fingers in that firm grasp.

"Thank you for saying nothing, Quentin. There is nothing to say. You are like your father in your power of silence, when silence is the only fitting reply. He had infinite sympathy and tact. And that brings me to what I wish to say, what I would have said to him had he been living. My tether is getting so short that I resolved to speak of it to-night. Who knows if I may be here to-morrow!"

Fleming glanced at him in surprise. Certainly Aveland looked ill—very ill. His brilliant eyes were sunken, and his face had the fatal waxen pallor of a

malignant illness; yet he was sitting here at the table —he must have some weeks more of life in him. Aveland answered the glance:

"I may last a little while longer, or not. I think not. However, I have not that strange foreknowledge of the Oriental, who will fix the very hour of his death and keep the appointment. It was of Frances that I wished to speak. I am leaving her alone. She has relations, but she has never known them, and I do not wish her to know them. They would but hate her as they have hated her father and mother. From Eden and Nazareth down to the present day men and women of greater gifts and deeper thought than their fellows have usually found their bitterest foes in those of their own household. Instead of rejoicing that a soul worth anything should belong to them, they hate it; crush it if possible, lie about it, cry 'he hath a devil,' set every obstacle in the way of its advancement, scoff at its difficulties, advise it to turn hedger and ditcher rather than attempt to do anything which they feel they could never do themselves; rejoice if it starves, rejoice still more if it dies; and if by some strange stroke of luck, some temporary oblivion on the part of the Prince of this world—if the poor struggling soul should succeed, down go the affectionate kindred on their knees and out come the tongues—not now to revile, but to lick the boots of the once-despised one. You perceive, Quentin, that I have not yet finished unburdening my spirit," this with a gleam of his accustomed humour. "No, all things considered, I do not desire that Frances should know her relatives. But she will be alone, and she will have a little money. A lonely woman without money is a being to be kicked

aside—what matter where she dies? A lonely woman with money is a being to be robbed—what matter if she starves? Therefore, Quentin, it has been in my mind to ask you to take care of her interests. You are rich and young, likely to live as long as she, and your wealth and influence will keep thieves at a distance—they will fear you. I feel sure the Patons, particularly Mrs. Paton, will do all in their power for my child; but Paton is no man of business. I have tied up most of the money safely enough; but she may wish to sell this house, or other contingencies may arise which I cannot foresee. I came here for her sake, knowing that I must die soon and thinking your father would be a protection to her when I was gone. But he has gone first, and I know no one whom I could trust save you and McKie—and McKie is an old man. So long as he lives, Frances will not lack a friend. But should he die?"

Aveland stopped. He had said all this in his usual soft quiet voice; only the eager brilliance of his eyes betrayed how much it was to him. Quentin sat looking down on the table, a faint pallor showing itself beneath the tan of his face. Then he lifted his head, and with a sudden light in his eyes and a warm underflush banishing the pallor, said,

"Would you like me as a son, Dr. Aveland?"

"My dear lad, I should like none better. I should be content to go if I could see Frances your wife."

"I do not know that she would have me. I have thought of it ever since you brought her back to Wildersmoor. I did not speak sooner because I feared refusal." He hesitated an instant. "Since last winter I have been held back by a belief that perhaps I ought

not to marry, seeing that a sort of Damocles' sword hangs over me. I have wavered this way and that; have sometimes thought my doubts the rankest folly; five minutes later they have seemed the only right view. You shall judge"—another momentary pause. "It was I who struck Ralph down!"

"Was it?"

Aveland's voice was as quiet as ever, his eyes rested on the young man with the same kindly brilliance. In his manner was no trace of surprise. When one has had a storm-tossed life, and sees the planks parting for the final plunge, one is not surprised at anything. And the absence of astonishment on Aveland's part made it easy for Quentin to go on.

"I did not intend to kill him, of course. It was accidental. I had not the slightest idea that I had done him any serious harm. We met on the moor and quarrelled. Ralph said something and aimed a blow at me. I parried it, wrenched the stick from his grasp and struck him with it. The struggle did not last a minute. He fell, and I threw the stick down and walked home, thinking that I had merely knocked him down. I never for a moment imagined he was hurt. I suppose I must have hit harder than I knew, and the handle was loaded. I went home feeling very angry; in fact, I pondered as to whether I should not follow him and give him a sound thrashing, so little did I dream that I had killed him! Later in the evening he was brought to the Hall, as you know. At first I did not even realize that it was I who had injured him. I thought he might have been attacked by a tramp, though tramps are rare on Wildersmoor. Then I could not believe he was actually dead. When I saw

it was so, I said nothing. I suppose I was a coward. I had no clear idea as to what I should do. Had I found him myself I should have gone for assistance and owned to it, but in the confusion of his being brought to me I hesitated before committing myself and ended by being silent. I was never once suspected, but I may be. Or an innocent man may be, which would oblige me to come forward. This contingency has held me back. I have felt I had no right to marry when at any time I might be tried for manslaughter and convicted. I suppose it would be manslaughter—not murder. A Woffendale jury would not hang me."

"Considering the general opinion of your cousin, I think a Woffendale jury is quite capable of bringing in a verdict of justifiable homicide. They would, no doubt, consider the provocation. What did you and he quarrel about?"

"Well, I objected to his coming here. I had good reasons for doing so, independently of my own feelings about it."

"I also objected. My letter was found in his pocket, I believe."

"Yes. It was that which had annoyed Ralph. He first spoke of it to me. He imagined I had asked you to write it."

"I see. What did he say?"

Fleming's face darkened at the recollection.

"I would rather not repeat it. Of course I will if you wish."

"No, never mind. Who was the man who crossed the moor with Blind John?—Ulyett?"

"I think so. I am not absolutely certain, but it must have been Ulyett. He had been at the Hall, and

we parted on the moor just before I met Ralph. The fog was then coming on pretty thickly. Ulyett must have lost his way, and so come across John. If he is ever accused—if John should even happen to meet him, and recognize his voice, of course, I must acknowledge myself the one guilty."

"Is Ulyett likely to return?"

"He will certainly return some day, and, considering the climate, he may return very soon. Besides, Esmé Rusholme has got some idea that I killed Ralph—how she has got it I cannot imagine—and she has told me that if I marry she will reveal what she knows, whatever that may be. Perhaps it is merely suspicion on her part. I could not possibly ascertain what she knows, or fancies she knows; it seemed to me that my only course was to ignore her hints as beyond my comprehension."

"Why should Esmé Rusholme object to your marrying? What concern is it of hers? I understood your cousin was engaged to her."

As Aveland spoke, some remarks of Nina Paton's flashed across his mind. He and Mrs. Paton were the best of friends, and one day after Mrs. Holt's visit to Sandhayes, Nina—Frances not being present—had permitted herself to express pretty freely her opinion of Esmé Rusholme's intentions. It was possible that Esmé might scheme to marry the surviving cousin.

"Would Miss Rusholme marry you, Quentin?" Aveland asked, and there was visible hesitation in the young man's manner as he replied:

"I don't know that she and Ralph were actually engaged, but certainly I expected it, as also did others. As for myself, I have never thought of Esmé save as

an old friend—we were all playmates, you know. The idea of marrying her never once entered my mind; she is not the sort of woman I admire. I could not possibly marry her—not for any reason whatever. I'd rather be hanged."

Aveland felt answered. Quentin's evasive reply confirmed Mrs. Paton's surmises. The girl was playing a bold game for the Fleming wealth. Perhaps she really knew nothing; had only made a shrewd guess.

"Then your position is this: If you marry my daughter, Esmé Rusholme will accuse you of Ralph's death. Also, whether you marry or not, the innocent man who was Blind John's companion—whether he was Ulyett or not—may at any time again encounter John, and be recognized; in which case you would be compelled to confess. Is that it?"

"That is it exactly."

"Well, as regards the second contingency, you are tolerably safe. I think more seriously of the first: it is an immediate threatening. Ulyett is related to the Rusholmes, is he not? You say you parted from him on the moor. Could he have overheard the quarrel between you and Ralph, and have by chance mentioned it to his relatives?"

"I have thought of that, particularly as Esmé alluded pointedly to Ulyett when she hinted at some knowledge she possessed. But I am absolutely certain that Ulyett would never do anything to cause me the least annoyance, and also I feel tolerably certain that he would not mention the quarrel if he did hear it."

"Then how do you account for Esmé Rusholme bringing Ulyett into the matter as you say she did?"

"Well, Ulyett came to me for advice that night. He

was rather bothered about money matters just before he left England. Esmé seems to have become aware of this, and she has drawn the conclusion that he was levying blackmail on me."

"Did you give him anything?"

"I lent him a trifle. That was before I met Ralph on the moor. I did not meet Ralph till I had parted with Ulyett. As I never told anyone of his visit, I cannot understand how Esmé has heard of it, unless George Rusholme knew something of Ulyett's affairs, and guessed that I had helped him. It can be but guessing. You are the only one to whom I have mentioned it."

"Ulyett called here that night, as I dare say Frances has told you. So far as I remember, he did not speak of having seen you. He seemed rather down at the prospect of Africa, and did not stay long. A kindly nature, and capable of great generosity, but unstable, I should imagine."

"Well, he's an unlucky fellow. He is stable enough in his friendships. All things considered, I do not believe he heard the quarrel. I believe Esmé has heard of his embarrassments from her brother, and has imagined the rest. Still, if she accuses me, and drags in Ulyett, the chances are that he will be suspected, and then, of course, that will settle matters for me. If I were alone, as I am now, my fate—whatever it might be—would not materially concern others. But if I were married——" Quentin stopped.

"Yes," said Aveland, gravely, "at present you only are involved. I suppose," he added, tentatively, "that reward offered by your uncle is not a factor in the case? I mean, it seems an unjustifiable idea, but whe

people are in want of money they sometimes do astonishing things—is Esmé Rusholme in want of money?"

Quentin shook his head.

"The Rusholme girls have always plenty to spend, and Esmé prides herself on petty economies. No, that reward has nothing to do with it."

"I was only wondering whether its withdrawal would make any difference."

"I think not, except that it would lessen the risk of an innocent man being charged. As regards Esmé, I am sure it would make no difference. And my uncle will never withdraw it. The loss I have brought on him has been almost the worst part of it all to me. I don't blame myself for Ralph's death. I regret it very much, of course; but it was purely accidental. Not for an instant had I the faintest intention of killing him, as I have told you. I should have struck anyone else in precisely the same manner; and, seeing that I never meant to harm him, I do not feel any great remorse for what was really and truly an unhappy accident. What does weigh upon me is the effect on my uncle. I have not only killed Ralph; I have killed the old man too. At his age the shock was too much. He has not got over it; he will never get over it. At first, I thought of telling him—I mean when he offered that reward. Then I turned coward, and said nothing. So he still believes in me—does not dream that it was I. I think that if he knew the truth he would withdraw his offer, but I cannot tell him."

"Tell no one," said Aveland, decisively; "there is unspeakable treachery in human nature. Judas is the type of the race. If you have one faithful friend, you are happy indeed. For even if those around you are

not directly treacherous like Judas, they will be indirectly treacherous like Pilate. When you are helpless, they—well-meaning and sympathizing—will yet listen to advice from your enemies, and will deliver you to pain and death—with much regret possibly, and vehement washing of hands; yet they will so deliver you."

"It may be so," said Quentin; "I believe it is so. Anyway, I have not told anybody, though at times I have felt as though it would ease my conscience to do so."

"Ah, there is the pull of the Romish Church. They know that desire to confess, and utilize it. It is, no doubt, a safety-valve. Personally, I should prefer sitting upon the safety-valve, no matter what the consequences. I'd rather be blown into meteoric dust than place myself at the mercy of my fellow-man."

"I am undoubtedly sitting on the safety-valve," said Quentin, gloomily. "Nothing would silence Esmé but my marrying her, and that I will not do. So there I am!"

"Crosier admires her, I have heard," remarked Aveland.

"Yes; but Esmé won't look at him, though he is a good little fellow, and will never end in a convict prison, as I may do."

"She might look at him if he had a living. A friend of mine has the gift of one down in Somerset; a pretty place, and well out of the way. The living will soon be vacant. The present vicar is eighty-nine, and so feeble that he is hardly likely to live another year. I think I will mention Crosier to my friend. I can recommend him with a clear conscience."

Fleming visibly cheered up.

"You are too good," he said, gratefully. "If you knew how ashamed I feel to intrude my miserable affairs on you!"

"My dear lad, your affairs are mine if you marry my daughter. Also, I wish to help you for your own sake, to say nothing of my old friend, your father. If Esmé Rusholme were married, and settled in a snug vicarage down in Somerset, it is hardly likely she would trouble herself about any Woffendale matter. Her own importance in the parish would be uppermost in her mind. Besides, she would no longer be here to pull the strings. Of course, there is the risk that she may take immediate action. That cannot be helped. It must be risked. With regard to the questions as to whether you should marry with this possibility of being tried for manslaughter hanging over you, I think I will not express any opinion. I cannot tell whether Frances would accept you. I do not know what may be her feelings towards you. If, however, you should decide on trying your fate, I will say that it would give me great comfort if I could leave Frances in your care. If I were tolerably sure of a life of average length, I might hesitate, might urge at least, some delay; but a man who is dying, has no right to hamper the living by any utterances of his, however well-meant and seeming wise. For his death changes life for those around him; new complications arise which he could not foresee, and he is not there to straighten them. Thus his wishes and commands, meant for the best, often bring about the very results that the dead man himself intended to guard against. I cannot tell what may happen when I am gone; therefore, I shall leave my child untrammelled by any wish of mine. I believe I would

rather she married you, even with that risk ahead, than drift about the world alone—perhaps, at last, to marry some man utterly unknown to me and utterly unworthy of her."

"I would take care of her, Dr. Aveland," said Fleming.

CHAPTER XXVII

LATER that evening, when the scarlet-shaded lamps were lit—for even in June the long day goes at last—Dr. Aveland sat writing the letter which would give Crosier that Somerset living so entirely unexpected by him. When any good fortune comes to us, we are apt to regard it as the result of our own merits. It never occurs to us that a kindness may be done with the object of getting us out of the way. However, in this case it was not Crosier who was to be got out of the way, but Esmé Rusholme; and the curate was decidedly the gainer, for he hereby obtained a snug home in a pastoral district, when otherwise he might have waited long for a living and missed his bride altogether.

Aveland never put off writing a letter. A troubled life had given him that instinctive fear of the morrow that never comes to those who have always sailed on an even keel. And this instinctive fear was heightened by his illness. If the letter could in any way smooth his daughter's path in life, there was good reason indeed for not delaying by even one post. So Aveland wrote; and having sent what he had written to the village post-office, leant back in his chair and looked out of the window into the summer twilight, where two figures now and then came in sight among the garden trees. At the gates the two clipped yews—the boat and the teapot—loomed darkly against the green light

of the western sky; Aveland's eyes fell on the quaint shapes and a half-smile curved his lips, a smile of quiet contentment, as of one who has done his work. Truly it was well to have come here; he would leave his daughter as he had hoped and wished. There was indeed that ominous cloud on the horizon, yet it might drift harmlessly away. So many threatened evils never come to pass.

Therefore Aveland watched the slow melting of that June day into night with more of peace and rest than many years had given him.

And the two in the garden? It was very pleasant out there, the salt air mingling with the scent of honeysuckle, for there was much honeysuckle on Wildersmoor. It flung itself recklessly about the moorland, fighting for hold with the brambles; clambered over the farmhouses and the cottages; and the Sandhayes porch upheld a mass of honey-filled flowers, to the joy of many winged things.

"How sweet the honeysuckle is!" said Frances, "and the moths are arriving. Moonrise is their dawn. Do you see those little dusky shadows flitting here and there? Those are the moths, and there is the moon."

"Only the silver tip as yet," said Quentin, looking towards a bank of cloudlets over the moor. "Does not Keats say Selene is stooping to tie her sandals when the crescent curves like that?"

"Yes, and compares the clouds to bean-blossoms—little black and white things, you know."

There was a slight, vaguely-felt constraint between them. They spoke at random—of this and that—of anything. In the dusk Quentin could not see his companion's face, save when they passed the dining-room

windows, which on this warm evening were uncurtained and open, the lamplight streaming out across the sandy paths. They stood for a moment looking in upon Aveland as he sat in the glow of the scarlet shades writing that last request to his old friend. He appeared younger, happier, better, and his daughter's heart was cheered. In after years one of her most vivid recollections was that of seeing him sitting there, close under the tall lamp, by the little table only big enough to hold an inkstand and Ptolemy. For Ptolemy was a literary feline and took much interest in letters, observing the progress of the pen with pricked, attentive ears; now and then tentatively stretching out a silky black paw, doubtful whether or no to play with the active quill. Against the soft yellow-brown background of the room, and faintly flushed by the lamplight, Aveland's features seemed to lose their pinched pallor—to return to their natural hue as of warm ivory. And thus seen, like a pale cameo, the antique beauty of his face and head was very apparent. Four hundred years the Romans ruled in Britain—a longer period than from now back to Elizabeth—forming colonies, bringing not only Roman but Greek and Syrian blood into the island, and that it is still a living stream is proved by hundreds of English faces, of which the originals may be seen on coins and busts and statues eighteen centuries old and more.

The two without still looked on Aveland, lingering unconsciously longer than the natural restlessness of youth inclines. Afterwards they were glad—Frances especially glad—that they had done so.

"He is better—I am sure he is better," she said, softly, as they drew away from the window.

"Oh, yes, he is better," Quentin echoed.

They strolled along a path on the moorland side of the garden, and Frances turned her head to listen to the swish and lap that came from out the western gloom.

"How still it is! There is not a sound but the splash of the tide, and hardly that."

"It is nearly high," said Fleming. "There has been scarcely a ripple all day. As for the moor, its voice never rises above a whisper unless a gale is blowing."

"And then the wind wakes up the trees to talk—yes, I know. I have always loved that silence of the moor. I have wondered how I shall find courage to leave it—if I must leave it. Yet I do not think I could live alone at Sandhayes."

"Could you live at Wildersmoor?"

They were standing at the end of the path by the low thorn hedge that divided garden and moor. The crescent moon had sailed clear of clouds and threw a faint light over the wide dim blurred plain, the trees showing but as deeper blurs in the darkness.

"Could you live at Wildersmoor?" Quentin repeated. "The Hall is yours and all that I have—and myself, if you will take me. How lamely one says these things! I have thought of nothing else for months and years, and now I cannot find fitting words in which to tell you so simple a thing. I wish I were a fisherman in the village yonder, who can tell a woman he loves her by appearing at her door with a clean face and a big fish."

"You have often appeared at the door with a clean face," said Frances, demurely, "but I shall expect the fish."

By-and-by they went indoors and told Aveland.

"I am more than content," he said. "What can I say to express my contentment? It is the happiest news that has fallen on my ears for very many years."

Quentin stayed late at Sandhayes that June night, lingering by the white gate between the clipped yews. The last lover who turned away from that gate was Ulyett—a perforce silent lover, a justly-ruined man, another fragment of human debris—so useless we say. Yet shingle, which is but debris, helps to check the flowing tide and affords firm foothold. Ulyett went out into the chill December fog—as was fitting for him. Quentin—as was equally fitting, into the summer night, with step as light as his heart.

The future unrolled itself like the year as he brushed the dew from the moss. Now was his summer—flower-crowned—beneficent, with promise of fuller luxuriance and autumn's golden fruition. In the distance of time, age, like "a lusty winter, frosty but kindly;" with "honour, love, obedience, troops of friends." And so indeed it was to be. For the man of Uz spoke truth when he said, "One dieth in his full perfection, being wholly at ease and quiet; and another dieth in the bitterness of his soul, and never eateth with pleasure." And none can tell why this or that should be. Time and chance happen to all. Quentin Fleming was one of the lucky ones of the earth. Good-tempered, honourable, rich; with no especial gifts, those jewels of God that excite the hatred of those who can only wear jewels of earth; having none of these, but possessing wealth, Quentin must needs be lucky.

But Aveland—whose gifts were many, and whose

guardian angel was therefore of a sterner order—belonged to those who die in the bitterness of their souls. To-night, however, he brightened visibly under the cheering knowledge that his child would not stand alone at his death. Yet he strove to read her future, with that pathetic striving which feels the uselessness of the effort. The years to come did not unfold themselves to him as they did to Quentin. With the intuitive doubt and dread that result from too close grapple with the wolf, Aveland looked on the shining curtain of to-morrow and wondered fearfully what it might conceal.

"It is what I wished," he said, when Frances came in with eyes dazzled by the lamplight, and sat down on a low stool by his chair, leaning her head against his arm. "It lifts a weight of anxiety from me. I hope you may be very happy, my dear."

"There is no one like you, father," the clear tones faltered slightly. "But I think"—with tender jesting—"I have taken the next best."

"Assuredly," replied her father, and there was a little silence.

Then Aveland roused himself to speak of the future, when he would be no longer present to advise. Perhaps having unburdened his soul to Quentin earlier in the evening impelled him to further utterance. It was no feeling of increased weakness. On the contrary, he felt stronger, because happier.

"I wish," he said, "that I could be always here to watch over you. But that is not to be. Neither is it the course of nature. Curious that natural events should be the bitterest—Time, and Change, and Death. I trust no change may come to you that is not a happy

one. Yet if it should, do not let any troubles of this world blight your spirit. I will not speak of the pleasures. Ease of life will not transform you into that terrible type of woman whose existence has run in such smooth grooves that she is utterly oblivious of everything outside her own four walls—the woman who turns down her thumb when the beaten fighter looks up from the arena for mercy. You will not become such. But even wealth and affection cannot always shut out sorrow; and so I say to you, Frances, if care or disappointment should touch you, still remain yourself. It is not fashionable now to quote the Lord God Incarnate, yet His words remain the same, and it is well to ponder the seed choked by the *cares* of this world. I hope and believe Quentin will be a good husband, a strong, faithful companion. Still, if not, let his failure neither harden nor weaken you. Strive not to become either fretful or bitter. Do not permit the iron to enter too deeply into your soul; it gives too dark a colouring. Remember your own independent personal life, and do not suffer your individuality to be degraded by any circumstances. Though God died the death of a slave, He did not lead the life of one. Let no motive of expediency decoy you from the path you would instinctively take if you stood alone. 'Be true,' says the Greek proverb, 'to the dreams of thy youth.' I think I have been true. I do not know that they have brought me much material advantage. That is not their office. Doubtless the Baptist was true to the dreams of his youth—and what did they bring him? A prison and a severed head. That is what they usually bring—more or less. Yet they are worth their price. Therefore I say, be true

to them. They preserve youth of heart, and eyes of youth, and dew on the soul. For a woman to keep these dreams is more difficult than for a man. The petty details of a household are antagonistic to them; and the marble that might have fashioned a Deborah is broken into sharp fragments for a cemetery path—fragments that hurt the tired feet, and are merely so much waste and ruin. I have often thought you something of a Deborah, my Frances," Aveland went on, tenderly; "a mother in Israel and a ruler. I trust your life may be as honoured and serene as hers. I am sure it will not be less noble. I do not know that I can give you any better advice—any advice that might be of especial use to you." He paused, thinking of Quentin's confession. Should Frances be told? On the one hand, the knowledge might save her from a possible shock; on the other, it would overshadow her with a dread contingency that might never arise. Her father decided on silence.

"After all," he resumed, "vague advice is not likely to be of much use; and moreover, I should not like you to remember me as prosing away about generalities on this eventful evening of your life."

"Dear," said his daughter, "you could not be prosy if you tried. Do not speak like that. Let me bring you some wine. You look so pale!"

In truth, Aveland did look singularly transparent. He drank the wine, and smiled at his child's anxiety.

"It is growing late, and I am tired; that is all. I feel better to-night—much better. Perhaps I am going to live—who knows? God bless you, my child. Good-night."

Aveland *was* going to live—but a life quite different

to that which he had hitherto known; for in the morning his daughter found him dead, lying on his side, calm and composed, having evidently died in sleep.

He was buried in the little churchyard at North Rode, within sight of Sandhayes. Perhaps it was not the resting-place he would have liked best—not his native village basking in the hot sunshine, with the white dust blowing over the roses, and cawing rooks flapping lazy wings. But, assuredly, in that native village his rare personality would not have received the recognition it met with here. For all Wildersmoor came to the quiet funeral; gentle and simple they crowded—a grave, silent crowd—through the old lych-gate, to pay Aveland the respect of their presence. Many of them he knew but slightly, some not at all. Yet they were there to show their unspoken admiration of the stranger who had dwelt among them. Even Woffendale sent a small contingent—including old Elkanah Fleming—to honour the man to whom a manufacturing town was almost as poisonous as a relation.

The elder Fleming had signified his approval of his nephew's engagement. "And I'll come to the funeral, lad. It is true I felt mad about that letter of Aveland's forbidding Ralph the house; but that's neither here nor there. I'll come. Frances Aveland is a handsomer woman than Esmé Rusholme, and you're right to choose for yourself. Maria must be content with the Curate for her favourite."

So Elkanah came to North Rode, and many others, including Granny Darlow and Blind John. And, later, the Vicar remarked upon the largeness of the gathering.

"I am somewhat surprised," he said to Quentin. "Considering Aveland's secluded life I should not have expected any attendance at his funeral, save, of course, his daughter and most intimate friends."

"Well, you see, Paton, you don't understand us yet. This isn't an eastern county. When a man or woman of originality happens to live amongst us, we have the sense to discern their gifts and pat them on the back. Down east they seem to kick them out of doors by way of a hint not to be different from other people. The north has the faculty of appreciation."

"I do not think Aveland cared for the north," said the Vicar, perversely.

"Perhaps not, but we cared for him. And he liked it well enough to spend his last years here."

"A pity he was wasted, so to speak, in comparative obscurity."

This time McKie answered.

"Aveland was sair let and hindered in running his race," he said, with a backward glance at the churchyard, "yet I doubt me if he would have greatly risen in any case. He could never stoop to dirty tricks, and that's a sair hindrance to a man. The multitude in every profession aye call for their pet Barabbas. And why not? It is but natural. The rogue is one o' themselves. Folk canna thole a man mair righteous than they. It's just an insult."

"Are not your strictures rather sweeping?" asked the Vicar.

"Truth is aye sweeping," said McKie.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE last day of July dawned cloudlessly on Wildersmoor; a day of pale, intense heat that seemed in subtle harmony with the broad-faced hemlocks that spread their white discs to the sun as though they would grow whiter in the blaze. There was not a breath of air to stir the motionless leaves hanging over the brown pools where the blue dragonflies darted to and fro like signal flashes. Even the gold-green beetles crawled languidly up the stems, or clung, like spots of emerald light, to fronds of bracken and hart's-tongue. The silence of summer had settled down on the moor, and there were no sounds save the drowsy hum of insects and the soft growl of the sea; and, as the morning wore on, a joyous ringing of the North Rode bells. For that morning Frances Aveland and Quentin Fleming were married at the little village church.

A few, very few, friends were present. Nina Paton, of course, and the Vicar in his clerical capacity, Elkanah Fleming, and McKie. With these came the whole population of North Rode, and many people from other parts of Wildersmoor, including Blind John, Vose, and Granny Darlow. Aveland—dead so recently—was present in the minds of all. An impressive personality may be disliked, it cannot be ignored; and on Wildersmoor there had been no dislike, but a friendly admiration that became possessive as

time went on; and culminated in sturdy liking for his daughter—all that was visibly left to remind them of him. So they came to wish her good luck, and her husband too. Fleming had always been popular. But it was Frances who had drawn the masculine spectators. Her father being dead, they felt a sort of responsibility respecting her. She was left there alone on the moor, and she had grown up among them. Therefore the stalwart fishermen and farmers gathered in the little church with a serious air, as of men doing their duty, and dispersed at the close of the ceremony with an air of satisfaction and many gruff and heart-meant congratulations; and also with many sympathetic glances towards Aveland's sunlit grave. A pity he died so soon!—a pity!—a pity!—that was the thought of all as Frances and Quentin came down the narrow path. They went straight to the station, intending to spend the next two months abroad.

"I hope she will be happy—I think she will," said Nina, watching the train out of sight. It also bore away the elder Fleming and McKie back to Woffendale, so the Vicar and his wife strolled home alone.

"Of course she will," said Paton, with serene assurance. He was quite reconciled to the marriage. Certainly he still preferred Esmé Rusholme. To his eyes she was the perfect type of woman. But as Nina refused to appreciate her many excellences, doubtless it was best that Quentin Fleming should marry a woman with whom Nina was intimate.

"I don't know about 'of course,'" pursued Nina, reflectively. "When a woman has had a good and charming father there is less chance of her being happy in the married state than when she has had a

bad or ordinary one. Quentin Fleming is tremendously nice, but he is not Dr. Aveland."

"A husband is a husband," quoth the Vicar, decisively.

"Precisely. That is the point."

"And it is her duty to place him first in all her thoughts."

"That is what makes it so infuriating. Besides, it's impossible. The fact is, the average husband is a great deal more pleasant to live with than the average father, hence the general readiness of women to marry. But the best husband that ever existed is simply not in the same street with the best father. There is nothing anywhere—no, not anywhere in the world—to equal a charming and sympathetic dad. My dad was neither the one nor the other; but Dr. Aveland—why, Cyril, I do not believe you are listening one bit."

"I was wondering," returned the Vicar placidly, "whether Mrs. Fleming would put up a stained-glass window to her father's memory. You might suggest it to her, Nina."

His wife laughed.

"Of course I will, dear, and she will do it. She will do many things for us, and Mr. Fleming shall help us to a bishopric. We will go to Heaven in the episcopal purple, which is a deal more comfortable than the rags of Lazarus."

However, it is only fair to say that Paton would have been equally earnest on behalf of his church and parish had he himself been clothed in those same rags, and with no prospect of anything better.

The day wore on with its heat and light and beauty,

the wedding-bells ringing out joyously from the square tower seaward and moorward. The sunshine quivered over Aveland's grave, turned golden, crimson, died, giving place to grey twilight and the light of stars, and noiseless flitting of soft moths above the grass instead of the sound of clashing bells. Through those hours Frances and Quentin sped southward and further south, and the sunshine travelled with them.

"Good luck to 'em!" said Vose, at the Grey Wolf that evening, giving the toast. Vose was busy and in his glory, Quentin having arranged that a dinner should be given at the Wolf to all who chose to come; a similar entertainment being provided at the Hall for the women and children.

"I hannot been so thrutched sin' th' inquest," said Vose, with a beaming face. "Eh!—that wur a toime! Dost thou moind it, John? Tha did a big day's talking then."

"Ay," replied John, who had returned from North Rode in a friendly waggon with Granny Darlow; telling her that she need not cook his dinner because he "wur going to dine at th' Wolf loike a' th' rest o' the world, an' wur minded to stay theer till neet just to see th' folk." John always spoke of seeing people. "So," he added, graciously, "tha con go up to th' Hall as soon as tha pleases."

"Dost tha think," she responded, in tones of scorn, "as I'm going to th' Hall when Fleming hissen isna theer? Nay, I am na that keen after victuals."

"Victuals!" retorted John, indignantly, "it's th' company tha goes fur. I'll not deny th' victuals helps loike, but tha dunnot go fur 'em. Tha goes fur company," with emphasis.

"Well, then," Granny replied, with equal scorn, "I am na keen after company."

John pondered. He could not decide whether Granny's reluctance to partake of the festivities arose from pride or fear. "Happen hoo thinks hersen too good fur th' company," he muttered to himself too low for Granny to hear, "or happen hoo knows th' company would think theirsen too good fur *her*. Eh! —that's it! Hoo's feart o' th' women's tongues when Fleming isna by to keep 'em down."

Herein John was mistaken. Granny was afraid of nothing. She did not care to join in the wedding feast because the chief actors had departed, and no one who interested her would be present. For most of her own class she felt supreme contempt, and rarely held any intercourse with them. Here and there was one towards whom she showed some slight friendliness; Vose, for instance. Perhaps she intuitively recognized in Vose the capacity for action swayed by strength of feeling and generosity of mind that always aroused Granny to sympathy. These were qualities in which Blind John was conspicuously deficient. Hence he never understood her. Satisfied that he had hit upon the true reason for her remaining at home, he sat and chuckled softly as the cart rolled on over the peaty track, the North Rode bells growing fainter till the creaking of the heavy wheels alone broke the hot stillness. No one spoke. Once the driver pulled out a silver watch about the size of a prize tomato, and observed that it was half-past three. A little later he clambered down without stopping the plodding horse, and gathered a bunch of honeysuckle.

"May as well ha' a posy on a wedding-day," he

said, arranging it in his button-hole. "Will ye have some, Missis?"

Granny signified assent, and the driver climbed back with a noble handful of the sun-stained flowers, which he gallantly handed to the old woman. In his manner there was a certain indefinable masculine appreciation of and sympathy with her past; and Granny responded, taking the honeysuckle with a similarly indefinable brightening and warmth; as when red embers are blown to sudden transient glow by some passing breath of wandering wind.

Then John had a spray put into his coat; and thus decorated, the party in the cart journeyed onwards—silent once more—to the Grey Wolf.

As the shadows lengthened, there was much chatter and laughter at the Hall, and louder talking and laughter at the Wolf. And a little way off, Granny sat at her cottage-door, facing the sunset. And thus, sitting apart and alone, she yet saw and heard more than any of those who feasted, and laughed, and drank the health of the married pair. For Granny saw and heard all that was said and done, knowing well all that would be said and done by the feasters. And above and beyond this she saw the white moths flitting above Aveland in North Rode churchyard, and heard the moan of the sea and the rustle of the grass as the nightwind stirred it; elemental voices speaking in unknown tongues, yet neither impossible nor difficult to comprehend if listened to in a certain sympathetic spirit. For sympathy is the key to all knowledge whose fruit is good. There is a knowledge whose fruit is evil; for that no sympathy is needed. But to the human creature who can—if only for a little while

—strip himself of the monstrous egotism of the race, and with conscious atavism and sympathetic feeling, throw himself back into the life of the dust, of stones and wood, of wind and sea, mingling sensibly with the elements of which he himself is a more conscious fragment, a more complex mingling; not thinking nor—worse still—talking about them, but simply listening thus humbly to the earth-voices—to that human spirit will come the knowledge which is divine. He will pass from listening to a deep understanding of this world and the creatures therein, to a keen intuition and a compassion as keen and deep; able, as it were, to drift at will through all grades of being, from the sea-coral to his nearer kin in fur and feather, things that rejoice in pleasant warmth and sweet coolness, in light and health—even as he.

Thus drifting, he will comprehend and love, which will be well for him; for sympathy is the wedding-garment, lacking which none shall stand in the presence of God. Doubtless there will be many a rent in the garment before its owner passes in to the Wedding Feast; for the highways are rough, and humanity is the weakest thing upon earth. But the Host will not be extreme to mark what is amiss. The possession or non-possession of the garment is the difference between John and Judas.

Granny's soul-garment, it must be confessed, was by no means in good repair. In truth, it might be said to be in tatters, and here and there were ugly red stains. Yet she wore the garment, and the unrent portions thereof were fair and shining. There were allowances to be made for Granny. A densely ignorant, aspiring spirit, with much about her that was

terrible, much that was noble. The thirty pieces did not attract her. Gold and jewels kindled no answering glitter in those black eyes. And of how many men and women can we say as much?

So being what she was, and listening through the long years to the voices on Wildersmoor, Granny, poor and ignorant, was yet able to comprehend the thoughts and feelings of men and women far removed from her by education and position. She had appreciated Aveland, and intuitively understood that life had been hard to him, and death hard too. She saw perfectly the mental likeness between him and his daughter, and resolved to champion that daughter if need be. And Granny was no mean ally. Now that Frances had married Quentin Fleming, Granny's self-imposed task of protection seemed easier; only one household for the keen old eyes to guard.

She sat long by her door that evening in the twilight, a solitary figure apart, while all the hamlet feasted and laughed. Then the night air blew softly from the sea, and Granny rose, looked up at the Great Bear shining over her cottage roof, set a dish of scraps outside for her neighbours' cats—she had none of her own—glanced towards the brilliantly-lit Wolf, and shut the door. There was no light in her cottage-window when the revellers trooped home; but, with the light slumber of old age, she heard Blind John's stick tapping over the ground as her tall Dutch-clock struck twelve.

CHAPTER XXIX

MRS. HOLT had declined to accompany her brother-in-law to the wedding. She said she considered Quentin's choice injudicious, and she would not countenance it.

"Please yourself, Maria," said Elkanah, when he started for North Rode that sunny morning; "I don't suppose the lad wants you, or the lass either. It was but civility that made them ask you, because you are living with me."

Mrs. Holt had replied stiffly that she had arranged to spend a week at Llandudno, and should take Esmé Rusholme with her; "therefore it is not to be expected that I should change my plans for this mistaken marriage."

"Take the Curate too," suggested Elkanah, with a wink. "What is his name? Crosier? Take him to console Miss Esmé."

Now this was precisely what Mrs. Holt had intended doing, but that her brother-in-law should suggest it, annoyed her; so Crosier was not invited to Llandudno, and Esmé consequently had time wherein to reflect on the trick that Fate had played her. True, she could marry Travis Crosier, and she resolved to do so; but what was the prospect of a country parsonage compared to the wealth of the Flemings? Her thin lips grew tighter and her cold grey eyes more steely as she thought of all she had missed. Material

advantages were to her the one end and aim of life, and of these Quentin had deprived her. Had Ralph not died on Wildersmoor she would have married him. Of this Esmé was positive. Probably she was right. Now, having slain Ralph—according to Esmé's belief—it was clearly Quentin's bounden duty to make full amends and purchase her silence by marrying her; thus giving her the house, carriage, diamonds, and general envy that would have been hers had she married his cousin. She was sure Quentin had sealed her cousin Jack Ulyett's lips with that thousand pounds. Yet she, who had lost most by that foggy night, got nothing! The longer Esmé pondered the more evil were her thoughts. She recalled the interviews in which she had plainly intimated to Quentin the sole condition of her silence, and his reply was—his marriage to Frances Aveland. Therefore she would strike with the weapon she held, and that hard. She had every possible reason of the average dishonourable mind. Disappointed ambition, hatred of the man who had rejected her, and still bitterer hatred of her unconscious rival—the unsleeping hate of the inferior, which cannot be appeased by aught save the uttermost degradation of that superior, and which, therefore, is so seldom appeased.

It was Esmé's nature to go cautiously to work, with petty lying and much scheming; so in this matter she decided on writing to her cousin Jack Ulyett before publicly accusing Quentin. If Jack answered, the letter might contain further evidence. If not, the slight delay was of no consequence.

The writing of that letter was a real consolation to Esmé. She detested Ulyett, and pictured with satis-

faction his amazement and annoyance when he would receive it. She wrote it slowly. Esmé was not an adept with the pen, and her literary style was awkward and infantine in the extreme. But her meaning was perfectly clear. However infantine her sentences might be, there was no ambiguity about them. She knew what she wished to say, and she said it; with many laments over the additional shock that was coming to Elkanah Fleming, whom she revered as a father. The gist of the letter was that Quentin was suspected of having caused Ralph's death. In fact, it would soon be common gossip. There was every probability that he would shortly be arrested. She—Esmé—would feel it her duty to reveal what she knew, and her Cousin Jack must pardon her also revealing the state of his affairs at the time he left England, and how Quentin had thereby been able to purchase his silence. Then, suspecting Ulyett's admiration of Frances Aveland, Esmé told him all particulars of the wedding, adding that it was "sad indeed to look forward to her life as the wife of a convicted criminal, but when people married for money they had no right to complain if a judgment fell upon them." For Esmé, like Mrs. Holt and many others, was persuaded that Providence ordered all things with especial reference to her private animosities.

The letter was long. Indeed, its composition occupied the spare moments of several days. One evening at the end of the week, Esmé put on her hat to meet the Rev. Travis Crosier, who was coming to the same hotel for a short holiday. She intended to meet him accidentally as it were, on his way from the station.

"I have a letter to post, dear Mrs. Holt. Have you any?"

"Thank you, my dear, yes. There is a note to my brother-in-law on the table. You are always so thoughtful. Have you been writing to your mother again? What a devoted daughter you are!"

Esmé did not explain the destination of the letter she held. It would not do for the Rev. Travis Crosier to hear that she wrote to a spendthrift cousin. As she dropped her packet into the box she smiled and said softly to herself.

"That will surprise Jack!"

It did. It surprised him so much that he rose from the bed on which he was slowly recovering from fever, and insisted on sailing for England by the next steamer. He must go at once, he said. He would resign his appointment; that was nothing, for anyway, he could not hold it long. The men who listened did not contradict him, for when West Coast fever meets with an enfeebled constitution and a disappointed life, the end of the encounter is easy to predict. Ulyett had meant to drift to death out there, helped mightily thereunto by the fever-spectre. But Esmé's letter was a call to action, so strong that he temporarily beat back the deadly sickness, and rose and walked ghostlike—but his own ghost, his own jesting, reckless self. He must go home, he repeated vehemently, and his acquaintance bestirred themselves after that blessed fashion which does what you wish without asking why you wish it. Thus it happened that a fortnight after the arrival of Esmé's letter Ulyett was afloat and homeward bound.

CHAPTER XXX

THE west wind, blowing up from the sea over Wildersmoor, brings a damp, warm atmosphere, so that on that coast the rainy days far outnumber the fine ones. Even in summer the Pike often wraps itself in grey mist, and a soft drizzling rain fills all the air, giving a deeper green to the mosses, a brighter sheen to the grass.

Granny Darlow's cottage was one often met with in that part of the country. It consisted of three rooms on the ground floor, a little garden in front, a small yard behind. This wet August evening the old woman slowly swung herself to and fro in the rocking-chair before the fire, while the raindrops slipped from the eaves with a monotonous patter on the single stone step, and the tall clock in the corner ticked on in unison with the raindrops. Year after year that old clock in its curiously carved case had told the minutes—the hours; some that went so slowly—so lagging—with such leaden feet; some that flew as lightly as the gossamer—as sparkling and as evanescent. Just as steadily it had ticked when Granny Darlow—a wee black-eyed toddler—looked up at its yellow time-stained face in childish wonder. It had told the swift minutes—the unrestful days—the long months of smouldering hate—when Granny Darlow's fair-haired husband crossed the threshold. As calmly and monotonously it had pointed to the hour when that

husband so suddenly disappeared; and in like manner the quaintly-designed hands had travelled on their ceaseless round till they reached another hour, in which the white angry billows cast up among the sandhills the body of a fisherman. Still the mechanical heart beat on quietly—steadily; what did it all matter to the old clock? Metal is so much better than flesh and blood. With the unvarying tone it marked the flight of its master Time, till the grandchild, Rossela, came under the old roof and looked up at the clock with wondering eyes. Rossela went away, and Granny Darlow sat alone—seemingly alone; for who can tell what shadows peopled to her the dim interior of the little cottage in the August twilight, made duskier by the grey falling rain and lit only by the dull red glow of the embers? Of what was she thinking?—of whom?—as she rocked to and fro in the old chair. Of the present? Of her own skill in brewing mysterious simples from the marsh-land plants for the cure of most of the ills afflicting the country people? Doubtless Granny was thinking of this, for she glanced at the bundles of dried herbs hanging against the walls. Or did her thoughts drift back to the past?—to the "meadows of memory"? Perhaps stranger plants grew in those shadowy fields than on Wildersmoor.

Patter—patter sang the raindrops outside; ting—tong droned the old clock; a few live coals fell upon the hearth, glowed more redly for a moment, then faded into darkness. The twilight deepened. Still the old woman sat on, gazing into the fire. Presently a footstep sounded on the threshold and a girl entered, a handsome girl with a half-sullen, half-defiant expres-

sion. Granny Darlow turned her head, and said, in a tone that expressed no surprise.

"So tha hast coom back! I thowt tha would one o' these days."

And stirring the fire, she set the kettle on and then resumed her rocking.

"Ay, I've coom back," replied Rossela, throwing off her wet cloak, "an what o' that?"

"I know'd as tha 'd make a muddle o' things," said the old woman. "Tha's bound to make a muddle!"

"Tha made summat o' a muddle thysen i' thy young days, if a' folks say is true," retorted Rossela, angrily.

Granny Darlow's eyes lit with sudden fire.

"I got what I wanted an' I wur satisfied—theer! Tha canna say as much. It isna in thee, to start wi."

"Anyways, I've getten brass enow to last me awhile. I wur allus saving, so tha needna chunner o'er my coming whoam."

"Brass!" echoed her grandmother, contemptuously, "tha'rt th' soart to think o' brass. It wurna fur brass as I——."

She stopped a moment and then resumed.

"Tha's getten that fro' thy grandfeyther, that's wheer tha's getten it fro'. Tha didna get it fro' me. I'd loike to ha' seen th' mon as would ha' offered me brass. I'd ha' throttled him!"

"Eh, well, I loike a bit o' decent clothes to my back, an' decent victuals to my mouth," returned the girl, with a short laugh. "Tha's never had owt barrin' a cotton gown i' summer an' a black stuff fur winter, as wur mostly given thee. An' many's th' toime tha hast made thy meal o' th' shore cockles, an' nobbut this owd roof o'er thy head. I con do better."

"Art tha sure as tha con do better? Dost tha think theer's nowt i' th' world barrin' foine clothes an' victuals? Tha con think as tha loikes. Happen theer's plenty as 'ud agree wi' thee. I dunnot hold wi' it mysen."

"I know'd as tha'd go on loike this," said Rossela, sullenly; "so I've brought thee nowt. I'd ha' brought thee summat smart if tha'd ha' been civil—tha never wur civil!"

"I wouldna ha' touched it if tha had. Tha con spend tha brass on thysen. It's noan th' soart as suits me."

"Eh, but tha'rt a rare un to moither one!" exclaimed her granddaughter, impatiently. "If a' as is said o' thee is true, tha has done things as fair frighten folk to speak on, an' tha makes a' this fuss o'er a bit o' brass. I conna understand thee!"

"Happen tha conna," with scorn. "Ay, I'll warrant tha conna! Tha'rt loike th' rest o' folk, only nobbut a bit worse."

And the old woman softly stroked her wrinkled hand, on which shone the worn wedding-ring.

Rossela perceived the gesture, and answered it,

"If I'd a husband," she said, scoffingly, "I shouldna murder him."

"No, tha'rt reet theer, lass. It's noan thy line. Tha'd speak him fair enow so long as he'd brass in 's pocket as tha could get hold on; an' a' th' toime tha'd ha' a chap ready to coom in at th' back door th' minute he wur out at the front. That's thy line, lass."

"There's one in Woffendale," pursued Rossela, "as is asking me to go to America wi' him. Happen I'll do it."

"Tha con please thysen. If tha stayed here, tha'd ha' to coom down to work, an' that wouldna suit thee."

"No, I reckon I'll do better fur mysen than to go cockle-gathering an' redding-up i' my old age."

"Tha needna worrit over thy owd age; tha'll noan live to it. Theer's nowt lasting i' thee; neither feeling, nor life, nor nowt else."

An angry retort rose to the girl's lips, but at that moment the kettle boiled over, hissing and spluttering on the hearth, and she rose to prepare the meal; while the old woman lit the oil-lamp that stood in the deep-set little window with its diamond panes of greenish glass.

"Is owd Elkanah at home?" asked Rossela, after a long silence.

"I dunnot know, an' I wouldna tell thee if I did."

"What hast tha getten i' thy head now?" inquired the girl.

But Granny Darlow answered not a word.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE sun next day beat hotly down on Wildersmoor from a cloudless sky. Blind John sat outside his cottage-door on this Sunday morning, arrayed in his best, and smoking a short pipe, while Granny Darlow " redded-up," and prepared his dinner. His curiosity was considerably aroused by Rossela's unexpected return, and, hearing the girl's footstep close by him, he took his pipe out of his mouth, and said,

" Art tha going over to North Rode, lass? "

" Dost tha mean to church? Nay, I am na. Parsons is noan i' my line."

" I didna think they wur," with a chuckle. " Conna thee set down awhile? I'd loike to hear summat o' Lunnon. I'm a bit curious about Lunnon sin' I led that chap o'er the moor. Tha saw it i' th' papers, didn't tha? "

" Did the mon say he wur a Lunnoner? "

" He didna deny it. Eh, but it wur a fog, an' no mistake! "

Here followed a long silence. John resumed his pipe, while Rossela, deep in thought, leant against the doorpost. Before them was the dusty road; beyond it stretched the moorland, now in its full luxuriance of fern and spreading marsh-plants, rank grasses, softest moss, and grey-green willows; with here and there a purple patch of heather where the ground rose higher. The burning sunbeams poured down upon the green

rolling expanse, the rippleless pools where vivid blue dragon-flies darted to and fro among the giant hemlocks. There was a sleepy stillness over everything. Now and then the clatter of dishes within told that Granny Darlow was busy. A soft-footed cat stole across the road and stretched itself out in the hot dust.

"Eh, but it's warm!" remarked John, at length. Then, as if following a previous train of thought, he said, "It's a pity tha didna coom whoam i' toime to see th' wedding, though it wur but quiet-like, seeing as Aveland wur dead not long sin'. Theer wur a mort o' folk, a' Wildersmoor, and some fro' Woffendale. An' theer wur dinner at th' Wolf fur everybody. It wur going on a' day, an' same at th' Hall fur th' women. Eh, tha ought to ha' been here, Rossela! It wur a graidly day—it wur that! An' we kept it up, too—ask thy grandam if we didna."

Apparently Rossela did not feel much interest in the wedding festivities, for she made no comment.

"Tha dunnot say owt," grumbled John, presently. "Tha wur allus so took up with thysen tha never had a word fur owt else. Tha hannot told me owt about Lunnon yet."

"Tha likes best to hear thysen talk," replied the girl.

"Nay, nay, a bit o' both. Conna thee tell me summat about it?"

"Theer's nowt to tell."

"Eh, but theer mun be. Art tha going back again?"

"Mind thy own business!"—walking away as Granny Darlow came out.

"Eh, but I'd give summat to know where hoo's

been," soliloquized John, as Rossela's departing footsteps struck his ear. "Loike as not, hoo's never been in Lunnon at all! Well, I never thought owt o' that lass. Is that thee, Granny?" turning his head.

"Ay. Tha'll find thy victuals ready on th' table."

"All reet," getting up. "Hold on a minute. Didn't tha say Rossela wur i' service i' Lunnon? Hoo dunnot seem to know mooch about it."

"I reckon hoo knows as mooch about Lunnon as tha does," replied the old woman as she left him.

"Hoo wunnot say either," muttered John, "th' owd besom! Eh, but theer's a noice pair on 'em!"

After dinner he repaired to the Grey Wolf, where—seated on a bench outside—he confided his suspicions to Vose.

"Dost tha mind that chap as coom here in th' spring? A Woffendale chap as had been awhile i' Driffield. Gleave wur his name, an' he wur going to try fur a job at Fleming's. He said he'd seen a Wildersmoor lass down Driffield way, an' fro' what I could make out, hoo wur Rossela Darlow fur sure. Hoo mun ha' been, fur theer isna another lass hereabouts as has left th' place."

"I mind well what he said," responded Vose, "fur I wur standing in th' doorway o' the Snug most o th' time he wur talking."

"Well," resumed John, "I'd loike to ha' that chap see Rossela. He'd know her again sharp enow. Eh, they're both alike—grandam and lass!"

"Nay," said the landlord, "tha'rt wrong theer, owd lad. Theer's a deal o' difference betwixt 'em—a deal o' difference"—reflectively gazing over the moor. "Fur Rossela, hoo's nowt but ordinary an' a bad un

at that. Theer's plenty more o' the same sort up an' down. But theer's summat i' th' owd lass as *is* summat, mark you! I dunnot dislike her mysen, though I'll warrant them tales are true enow. Hoo's noan like Rossela."

Blind John shook his head unconvinced.

"Hoo'd be a noice missis fur a chap to wed, wi' them moor pools staring him i' th' face," he observed significantly.

"I dunnot know as I'd mind wedding th' owd dame if hoo wur a bit younger," returned Vose, philosophically. "A chap mun risk summat, an' I'd sooner run my chance o' th' pool than ha' Rossela's goings-on. Happen it wur th' mon's own doing mostly. Tha'rt rare an' sharp, owd lad, but tha dunnot understond women."

"Eh, I dunnot want to! It fair beats me to think how th' Lord made 'em loike that—worriting an' moithering! They'll worrit an' moither a mon till he conna tell whether he's standing on his head or his heels, an' then turn round an' say it's a' his doing!"

"They might say th' same o' thee, owd lad," said Vose, with a broad smile. "Tha dunnot understond 'em—that's what's th' matter wi' thee—tha dunnot understond 'em!"

CHAPTER XXXII

THERE is often a point where many converging roads meet, cross each other in seemingly wild confusion, disentangle themselves, separate once more, stretching away widely divergent; never again to meet at that same point, in that same tangle.

Afterwards, those whose lines suddenly tangled on Wildersmoor that golden September looked back to the gossamer month of that year as the point to the converging roads. They had all been drawing towards it—all unconsciously, save Granny. But then Granny was ever on the look-out for human tangles. She perceived them from afar, as the seaman's eye catches the glitter of icebergs on the swell. And she was likely to prove a sturdy helper, because she possessed the vantage ground of the man who dodges round the outskirts of a fight, watching his opportunity to sail in and deliver his swashing blow.

Through the hot August days Granny looked after the ways of her household, "redded up" for Blind John, wandered about the moor gathering herbs like another Medea, and sat at her cottage door from sunset till the starry waggoner had driven quite over the chimney-pots.

It was the season of shooting-stars. Before Granny's eyes they flashed and fell over the moor. She believed they were rejected souls falling—falling

—doomed so to spend the ages. It was the custom on Wildersmoor to call shooting-stars Wanderers, for does not St. Jude speak of " Wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever? " Granny vaguely contemplated the possibility of herself becoming one of these flashing Wanderers. She was not possessed of that amazing conceit which imagines itself so indispensable to the Almighty that pardon is assured. Neither did she contemplate winning Heaven by repentance. " If folk mean to repent o' things, they shouldna do 'em," had been Granny's creed. Granny did not repent of her deeds. So she watched the Wanderers glittering into sight in the blue, falling with glancing flash as of drawn steel, vanishing as swiftly—wandering souls with deadly histories, seeking rest yet never finding it; approaching the sweet familiar earth whereon they sinned and died—perhaps for one brief look at the spot where they had surely been happy for a little space. All these were company for Granny. She knew her Bible; she knew the life-stories of some who were without doubt Wanderers—Athaliah, who slew all the blood royal; the Daughter of Ethbaal King of the Sidonians; the Women who mourned for Tammuz; the Women who wedded Angels; surely these were doomed to the starry darkness! She felt a sort of affinity with them. As they were, so would she be. Neither did she feel any rebellion against the destiny. The doom was just. Granny had a fine sense of justice, provided the judge was no mortal man. For the fantasy called Human Justice her contempt was immeasurable.

Rossela had gone away. The little cottage on Wildersmoor was not to her taste. To live in such a

dwelling one must either be true poet or true peasant. Rossela was neither. She had accordingly drifted away, telling Granny she was going to America.

"Please thysen," the old woman had responded. She detested her granddaughter, but being a peasant-woman she did not, like her betters, enjoy turning any fellow-creature—not even a relation—out into the world to starve or not, as chance might dictate. If Rossela chose to stay, the cottage was open to her. However, hard fare and peasant life were not agreeable to Rossela, and the moor was just the moor—wild and ugly, and gaslights were better than stars. Therefore she departed wellnigh as suddenly as she came, observing as she arranged her hat before the cracked little looking-glass, that she would have a day or two in Woffendale before the steamer sailed.

"Woffendale!" echoed the old woman in surprise, "what dost tha want theer?"

"Business wi' owd Elkanah," responded her granddaughter, with a short laugh.

"He'll send thee about thy business sharp enow."

"Nay, he willna. He'll be glad to see me. I had a letter fro' him i' th' spring a-saying so. I wur allus better at getting hold o' th' brass than tha wert."

"Women o' thy soart con allus get brass," retorted Granny with truth, "an' I shouldna wonder if tha finds a mon fool enow to marry thee. Men-folk mostly loikes them as they con understond. What's owd Elkanah going to pay thee fur?"

"A bit o' help."

"Help?" repeated the old woman, "what sort o' help?"

But Rossela was gone. Granny went to the door

and looked after her, puzzled and suspicious, knowing that pursuit and question would be useless.

What help could Rossela give Elkanah Fleming unless in the matter of his son's death? And even in that matter, what could she know about it?

Granny was baffled. A thoroughly base nature can always baffle a higher, and Granny—crime-stained Granny—was yet an infinitely higher type than her descendant. The more she pondered over Rossela's words the less she liked their possible meaning.

The public interest in Ralph Fleming's death was fading despite the increased reward. Best that it should. A revival of that interest might lead to complications. Rossela's mysterious errand was as a cloud on the horizon; who could tell into what storm it might develope?

Early in September Frances and Quentin came home. On the day they were expected an accident happened at Wildersmoor station. A passenger from Woffendale slipped on getting out and broke his leg. He seemed ill and feeble before he slipped, said the solitary porter when describing the occurrence. The injured man seemed to know the neighbourhood, for he directed himself to be taken to the Grey Wolf, and dictated a telegram to Dr. McKie.

"I shall do very well at the Wolf," he said. "Lift me carefully. Better put a plank on a ladder, and carry me on that."

The porter accordingly went to the little inn, returning with Vose and William and the short ladder that had served as a bier for Ralph Fleming. Vose was rather flattered by the stranger's readiness to put up at the Wolf, and scrutinized him closely as he was

lifted. He was a fair man, of a reddish fairness. His curling hair and moustache were ruddy; his eyes, of a bright blue, had a half laugh in them, and yet were melancholy. No doubt his complexion was once in keeping with the hair; now it was of a deadly waxen pallor, as also were the long-fingered delicate hands.

"Surely I have seen you before, sir?" said Vose, inquiringly.

"I daresay. I have come over to the Hall now and then. My name is Ulyett."

"To be sure, sir, to be sure," responded Vose, carefully raising his end of the ladder; "to be sure," he repeated meditatively. Then with more animation:

"Now, William, walk steady."

"I know how to carry a gentleman," said William, a trifle resentfully. "I helped to carry Mr. Ralph on this here same ladder."

"Mr. Ralph wur dead, tha fool!" replied Vose.

"Was it the same ladder?" asked Ulyett.

"Ay," said William, who was a taciturn lad.

The journey was a short one, the inn being so near the station. As his bearers passed by the Hall, Ulyett saw over the gates a triumphal arch, glowing with the deep tints of late summer flowers—dahlia and marigold and purple heather—and he guessed its meaning.

"Are they home?"

Vose answered:

"No, sir, not yet. Mr. and Mrs. Fleming 'll be home this afternoon. We put it up early so as it might be ready."

"I will send a note to the Hall for Mr. Fleming when he arrives."

"Very good, sir. William can take it."

"And can I have a front room at the Wolf?"

"Certainly, sir. It's not much of a room for a gentleman."

"I should like it."

No more was said till the Wolf was reached. News of the accident had spread, and there was a small but deeply-interested crowd round the door. Vose and William came to a halt.

"Would you like, sir, to be carried up now? Or will you wait awhile till the room is put a bit straight for you? Granny Darlow 'll redd it up in half-an-hour."

"I will go up now. Granny can fuss about as she likes when once I am in bed. I feel as if I had had about as much as I can stand."

"That's the chap!" exclaimed a voice—Blind John's.

Ulyett turned his head as his bearers were raising him again.

"Ah," he said, "Blind John!"

"Ay, Blind John," returned that individual, coming forward. 'That's it!—Blind John. Him as took thee to North Rode station th' foggy neet Mr. Ralph wur murdered."

Ulyett looked at John curiously, as not having seen him clearly before; then smiled slightly and glanced at Vose.

"I know'd I'd find thee one o' these days," John continued, "I know'd——"

"Howd thy jaw," said Vose, with decision, grasping the situation; "howd thy jaw! Dost tha think an invalid gentleman has nowt to do but to listen to thy moitherings? Get on, William."

William heaved up his end of the ladder and they walked briskly indoors and up the staircase, John's voice sounding after them:

"Moitherings, indeed! I'll see what owd Elkanah Fleming thinks on it—theer!"

The front upper room of the Grey Wolf looked out across the moor along the road leading past the Hall gates. Ulyett had the bed moved so that he could see out of the window without raising his head. Then William retired.

"Will's a good lad. He'll say nowt," observed Vose, as the door closed and William's heavy footsteps slowly descended the stairs. "An' as for John, it's nobbut John's say-so, an' what o' that! There's no call for you to make yoursen uneasy; sir."

"I am not uneasy. I am so near the end of my tether, that John's recognition is of no consequence one way or another. He is quite right. He did guide me to North Rode that night. Have you kept any papers of that time? I should like to see them by-and-by."

"I did keep a week or two o' the *Woffendale Star,* and you can see 'em an' welcome." Here Vose paused. He felt convinced that Ulyett was the man who struck down Ralph Fleming, but a certain magnetism was beginning to tell upon him. Ralph Fleming had possessed no magnetism. Ulyett's helplessness; the half-pathetic, half-humorous look in the eyes; the charm of the voice—Ulyett had a singularly sweet voice—these things appealed to the generosity which was a characteristic of the landlord of the Wolf. He cleared his throat and resumed:

"This here room, sir, is yours as long as you wish;

but if so be as you should feel worrited about th' papers an' John's moitherings, there's ways o' getting across the moor, an' boats at North Rode that'll make a trip to Man any day you like. I've a cousin in Man —a farmer there. He's noan th' sort to ask questions, an' I reckon folk wouldna ask questions of him neither."

While speaking, Vose had carefully averted his eyes from motives of delicacy. Now he turned and met Ulyett's gaze. Vose had the instincts of a dog. He comprehended without exactly knowing what it was that he comprehended. Something in Ulyett's eyes puzzled him. There was appreciative gratitude and trust; and behind these a half-laughing, half-reproachful denial that—as Vose afterwards put it to himself —" made him think he hadna hit th' right nail on th' head after a'."

Ulyett perceived the vague bewilderment, smiled, and held out his hand, saying simply—" Thank you! " and Vose, grasping the thin fingers, fell completely under the sway of smile and voice.

" So theer's naught for you to fret o'er, sir," he resumed, after a moment's pause. " I'll send Granny up here to straighten things a bit. Being a widower, I've getten no womenfolk about th' place."

He went in search of Granny, and having given her instructions, addressed himself to William, who was meditatively polishing the pewter mugs.

" Will," said Vose, " keep tha mouth shut about this, wilt tha? "

William nodded and observed sententiously, " John willna."

" I know. I'll give him a talking to."

"He's off to owd Elkanah a'ready."

"What!"—Vose jumped up from the massive oaken settle.

"I see him pass in his Sunday clothes, two minutes sin', so I went to door an' watched him to station. Theer's th' whistle!"

Vose dashed out at the front only to see the white smoke of the Woffendale train as it glided behind the Pike.

"Eh, well," he said, coming back, "I'd ha' given summat fur that not to have happened, but it's nobbut natural for a blind mon to be keen after brass. He hasna his sight to help him. Will, tha munnot let anybody upstairs barrin' Granny and th' doctor. I reckon he—" with a jerk of his thumb towards the ceiling to indicate Ulyett—"is one o' them gentlemen wastrels, but fur a' that I like him."

"Mr. Ralph wur nowt to boast on," observed William.

"No, he wurna. An' besides, I've no mind to ha' it said that a gentleman wur took out o' th' Grey Wolf to be hanged. Better get out more o' them pewters, William, theer'll be a mort o' customers to-neet; what wi' th' Hall folk coming home, an' a' this moitherin' o' John's into th' bargain."

Later, McKie arrived in response to the telegram. He saw his patient, and had an interview with Vose, who gave him a brief and graphic account of Blind John's doings. McKie looked grave.

"Gone to Mr. Fleming at Woffendale, has he? And what are ye proposing to do? Mr. Ulyett is ill—verra ill. I'm not meaning his broken leg. That's naething. Just a simple fracture. But he's worn by fever, and

his lungs—weel, he'll not last long, and may go quickly."

However convinced the doctor might be of Ulyett's guilt, he did not now feel enthusiastic about hunting him down. McKie belonged to the old-fashioned medical school. He had a friendly feeling towards a patient, merely because the individual was a patient. He regarded sickness and death as enemies; not as valuable allies. A patient was to him as a smitten friend; not a subject or a purse—or both—according to circumstances. And being thus honourable and kindly—that is to say, old-fashioned—the sturdy North Briton was ready to do strenuous battle for Ulyett's liberty during the brief term of life that remained to him. Therefore McKie wished to know Vose's probable course of action.

"Mr Ulyett seems fair an' honest about it," Vose replied. "He didna deny he wur with John that neet. I've allus held that a mon munnot lay his doings on other folks. He ought to shoulder 'em hissen, an' then I'll not say but what I'll give him a helping hand. I've told Mr. Ulyett I'll stand by him."

McKie looked relieved.

"I'm glad to hear ye say so. I will see Mr. Fleming when I get back to Woffendale, and I'll look in here again towards evening. That old woman, Granny Darlow, can look after Mr. Ulyett perfectly well. He'll not need much nursing. Only someone handy in case he wants anything. Can she stay with him?"

"Hoo can be here most o' th' neet, sir, an' me an' William can tackle the day in turns."

McKie nodded approval and departed, considerably perturbed in spirit.

"Deil take the lad!" he muttered, as the train bore him back to Woffendale. "Why couldn't he die on the coast! I must see Quentin about it."

Little did the doctor imagine how deeply Ulyett's return would concern Fleming.

CHAPTER XXXIII

EARLY in the afternoon Nina Paton drove over to the Hall from North Rode, bringing with her Ptolemy the cat, and Malise the terrier, who had been visiting at the Vicarage while their mistress was away. Nina had vainly tried to bring her husband too.

"Now do come, Cyril. They will be sure to ask me to stay dinner, and how can I stay without you?"

"Why not? If you are not back by six, I'll come on later and fetch you."

"Still I wish you would come. Old Mr. Fleming will be there, and it would look better. Also they would be pleased to see you."

"I would if it were not Saturday. You know I always prepare my sermon on Saturday afternoon."

"Let it go, and read somebody else's instead," Nina suggested recklessly. "I knew a man who read one of Jeremy Taylor's sermons to his congregation and they liked it a deal better than his own."

Even this soothing idea did not shake the Vicar's resolution. He settled himself firmly in his study with a pile of Christian Fathers on the one hand and another pile of modern reviews on the other; and thus Nina left him, shaking her pretty fair head.

As she passed Sandhayes the old homestead seemed to wear an air of forlornness out of keeping with the sunshine of the warm September day. Yet the place was as carefully tended as ever. Perhaps the forlorn-

ness was in Nina's mind, the reflection of her own regretful thoughts of the many pleasant hours she had passed there—hours which could not return, simply because they had been so pleasant. One may always expect a return of unpleasant times. If you have starved once there is a probability that you will starve again. But if you have been happy once, make the most of those memories, they are all you will get of that kind.

Nina found Dr. McKie at the Hall.

"And how are ye, Mrs. Paton?" he asked, grasping her hand with more than his usual cordiality. "I thought I'd come over to welcome the young folks home, seeing that there is nae father to do it, and auld Elkanah laid up."

"I am sorry to hear old Mr. Fleming is ill. I expected to meet him here."

McKie nodded.

"It was so arranged. But he has had a good deal of excitement this afternoon,—I'll have to tell Quentin about it—and he has had a fit. At his age it is verra uncertain how illness may end. I see ye have brought the Sandhayes beasties with ye, and well they look too! Eh, but it's a sair pity to think of yon house and the friendly times in it—all gone with Aveland. Some men take a deal away with them, Mrs. Paton."

"Yes, oh, yes!" said Nina, touched by the pathos in McKie's voice; "life seems a great muddle, Dr. McKie."

"It's a' a muddle," replied the North P
ing poor Stephen. "For everything ye
as much. But it's a grand racket after a

with sombre enthusiasm, "and I'm proud to bear ma part in it. Here they are! and the lass as blooming as a June rose! God bless her!"

A bewilderment of greetings, inquiries, barking of dogs, and arrival of luggage. Then Mrs. Paton critically surveyed her friend, the two being alone in the latter's room, a room looking westward over the moor.

"Are you glad to be home? You look brilliant. I am thankful to have you back. Dr. McKie and I were nearly weeping before you appeared, so melancholy both of us. We shall perk up now and be happy."

"Why not!" Frances laughed and leant out of one of the wide-open windows that let in the sunny warmth of the September afternoon; "why not? I see no reason why we should not all be happy. How good it is to be home! Of course we have had a delightful time, but I should soon grow tired of the southern glare and heat, and pine for the grey coolness here."

"Do you call that grey and cool?" with a nod towards the window.

"Not grey just now, but cool. The sunshine is a golden haze, and does not scorch. Nina, you must stay and dine with us. Shall we send a telegram for your husband?"

Mrs. Paton explained.

"So, you see, he will appear by-and-by. I do not think a telegram would shake his resolution of remaining faithful to his sermon, or his magazine reading. I am never sure which it is."

Later, when the four sat down to dinner, Quentin demanded news of the district.

"We are both pining for news," he declared. "We want to know everything that has happened. Who has got a new dog? Or got engaged? Or built a new stable? Or any other interesting item of that sort. Now surely, Mrs. Paton, you can tell us all about Wildersmoor; and for Woffendale news we look to you, McKie. By the way, I think I will go over there this evening and see my uncle, if you will excuse me, Frances. I shall not be away more than two hours."

"Shall I come too? Do you think he might like to see me?"

"He would be glad to see ye to-morrow, Mrs. Fleming," said McKie, "but to-night one visitor will be enough for him. And, besides, ye will be tired with your journey. He is well looked after. Miss Esmé is staying for a day or two with Mrs. Holt, and she is a good nurse for a man. It's just vanity and love of meddling that makes her so, but it is useful."

"I have news of Esmé Rusholme for you," said Nina. "She and Travis Crosier are engaged, and he has got a living in Somerset—nobody can imagine how, least of all himself."

Even to Nina it never occurred that her own words to Aveland had caused that Somerset living to fall to Crosier. Only Quentin knew how it happened, remembering that last day of Aveland's life.

"So they will be married very soon—in a few weeks," Mrs. Paton continued in a tone of extreme satisfaction.

"I recollect your resolve to arrange that marriage, Nina."

Frances Fleming spoke with the most smiling seren-

ity—the most complete oblivion of the reasons Nina had given for promoting Crosier's love affairs.

"She has forgotten what I told her about Esmé," thought Nina, "or does not care—is too happy to care. I suppose a happy marriage always stuffs one's ears with cotton wool and ties a bandage over one's eyes, like a figure of Justice." Then aloud, "Well, yes, it is my fashion of dropping people I dislike down the oubliette. I do not in the least mind its being a pleasant oubliette. Only let me drop them down it—that is all."

"A verra good way," said McKie, "ye just smother them with roses. Nae harm done, and a grand relief. I can sympathize with ye, Mrs. Paton. Miss Esmé is nae favourite of mine. I like yon cousin of hers better, though little did I think I should ever say so."

"What cousin of the Rusholmes' do you mean?" Quentin's tone was one of puzzled surprise.

"Why, yon Ulyett, poor lad! Did ye know he was coming home? He broke his leg in getting out of the train here this morning, and I set it for him at the Grey Wolf. But he is verra ill."

"Here! Ulyett here!" A dark red flush mounted to the very roots of Fleming's hair. "Here!" he repeated, the flush slowly dying.

"Would you like to have Mr. Ulyett brought to the Hall, Quentin?"

Frances made this suggestion, naturally attributing her husband's evident perturbation to concern for his friend.

"He would be far more comfortable with us than at the Wolf," she continued.

"Thank you, dear. As you have no objection, I

think I will bring the poor fellow here. I'll see about it at once, before I go to Woffendale."

In truth, Quentin was so staggered by the unexpectedness of the news that it was with difficulty he pulled himself together. Of course it was probable that Ulyett would return some time, but as long as he did not come across Blind John there seemed little fear of complications. McKie would not have spoken, and only he and John could identify Ulyett with the stranger who crossed the moor that night. Now, however, accident had placed poor Jack in the one house of all others in which his whilom guide was almost certain to recognize him. When John was not out on the moor, he was sitting at the Wolf. Sooner or later he would inevitably hear Ulyett's voice, and then——

Here McKie's voice broke in upon Fleming's whirling thoughts.

"I am not so sure about bringing Ulyett here. It is my opinion he is safer at the Wolf, with Vose to keep a look-out for him."

"Why a look-out?" Frances asked. "What has Mr. Ulyett done that a look-out should be kept for him? And why cannot we keep as good a look-out as Vose?"

"Weel, I was minded to tell your husband in the train, Mrs. Fleming, but we are all friends here, and the poor lad canna live long, so——," here McKie's gaze rested meditatively on Nina.

"I shall not tell my husband," she said, promptly.

McKie regarded her with approval.

"Ye are a discreet woman, Mrs. Paton. It's just this, Quentin, your uncle's illness is the result of over-

excitement. When I was called in there this afternoon I found he had been pairfectly well till he saw two visitors. First a woman—Mrs. Holt saw her, but did not know her. She said she had some information to give about Ralph's death. Your uncle saw her in his study. What she told him naebody knows, but when she left he told Mrs. Holt he had his finger on the murderer, and ordered the carriage. Before he started however, a blind man came, who gave his name of Blind John of Wildersmoor."

"Blind John!" exclaimed Nina.

"I suppose," said Quentin, "John had recognized the man he had guided that night, and came to say so?"

"That is what I conclude," said McKie, in his cautious manner. "Anyway, your uncle was even mair excited after Blind John's visit, so Mrs. Holt tells me. He expressed an intention of driving straight to the police-station, and had put on his hat when he was seized with a fit. They sent for me, and I was there in ten minutes—in fact, I was on my way to see him. But he is verra bad. Age, ye see, auld age."

"But," said Frances, "even if Mr. Ulyett was the man whom John guided, that does not prove him to have killed Ralph."

"Ye are quite right, Mrs. Fleming; it does not. And I doubt whether a Woffendale jury would convict him, especially as Ralph Fleming was nae favourite. I fear, though, there is evidence enough to send to trial. Further, we cannot tell what the woman's information may have been."

"Jack Ulyett never did it," said Nina suddenly; "he is not the sort. Besides, were they not friends?"

It was Quentin who replied:

"He and Ralph? In a way. Mutual accommodation. Ralph wanted a companion, and Ulyett wanted money; and he was the better player of the two."

He spoke with a tinge of bitterness. The time came when the name of Ulyett was a sacred memory to Quentin and his wife. But just then poor Jack was to Fleming simply a troublesome friend, who had already worked upon his—Fleming's—feelings for a considerable sum, and who could not even remain on the West Coast, whither a miracle had sent him. Yet despite the momentary bitterness, Quentin was himself again. Not perhaps the radiant host of ten minutes ago, but still himself. A man may be pardoned some little bewilderment when a chasm opens unexpectedly at his feet. Now however, that he had seen the width and the depth of it, had realized that there was no getting round or over it—in short, no possibility of saving Ulyett from arrest—why, things were straight and clear. He must tell his wife first. That was hard. He looked across the table at her; what would she say? Not that Quentin feared harsh judgment or bitter words; he knew her too well for that. But what would she say to the immediate future?—to his trial and the term of penal servitude which was the most favourable sentence he could hope for? As he thought thus, his eyes fell on the table before him, with its soft glitter of glass, and silver, and shining damask, half in lamplight half in twilight; for the window had been left open and uncurtained this warm September evening. Beyond was the rich darkness of the room, a fitting background for his wife's beauty.

Fleming was fond of his home, and he wondered

vaguely how a cell and a plank bed and prison meals would suit him. Would they at last become familiar? —or at least, not so strange and impossible? Well, he would have the happy knowledge that Frances and the Hall would be here—here, ready and waiting for his restoration. He checked his thoughts to listen. His wife was speaking.

"I feel sure," she said slowly, "that if Mr. Ulyett is the man, then the death was an accident. He is not an intentional murderer."

For she had been recalling Ulyett's demeanour when he paid his late visit to Sandhayes that foggy night. He had been his usual courteous self, gentle, saddened, distinctly depressed, with a visible effort to appear cheerful. It was impossible—though to be sure, there is a great variety in murderers—it was impossible to believe that Ulyett's general behaviour that evening was compatible with his having deliberately killed a friend an hour or two previously. His manner was emphatically against the supposition.

"And I still think," Frances continued, "that he would be better here. As Mr. Fleming is so ill, he cannot order the police to make any arrest."

"He is too ill, certainly," assented McKie; "but the accusation can be no secret. When auld Elkanah is in full blast half Woffendale can hear him. Mrs. Holt will no keep silent, to say naething of the servants. Then there is Blind John to point out the puir laddie, so the police may take action on their own account. Therefore Ulyett is safer at the Wolf for this reason: ye would not know whether or when the police intended arresting him. They would come suddenly upon ye, and ye would not be able to get the lad away.

Now with Vose it would be otherwise. Among his class rumour is as rapid as the telegraph. He'd know what the police meant to do almost as soon as they knew it themselves, and that would give time to consider the best course to pursue. Ulyett's illness is a certain protection to him, and he is mair likely to die in peace at the Wolf than here, kindly though ye mean it, Mrs. Fleming."

"Well then, I will send him some things. The Grey Wolf cooking is not very suitable for an invalid."

At this moment Ulyett's note was brought in.

"He wishes to see me to-morrow," said Quentin, after reading it. "That will be better, as I may be detained at Woffendale. Now, doctor, are you ready? I suppose Ulyett is not restricted as to diet? Send something round there to-night, darling," this to Frances. "I am sorry to leave you alone this first evening at home. I will be back as soon as I can. Stay till my return, Mrs. Paton, and I will drive you home."

"Cyril is coming to fetch me, thank you, Mr. Fleming."

"Is he? Well, both of you stay. I shall be glad to see him."

"No, I shall not stay, nor let Cyril do so either," said Nina, when the two men had gone. "We should be simply nuisances. Meanwhile, it is good to have you alone, Frances. I have a million things to say. When I have uttered a quarter of them I will go over to the Wolf and call on Jack Ulyett. I will accompany the basket of dainties and shall do him more good than they will."

Frances laughed.

"Of course. I wonder how Dr. McKie hopes to keep his patient at the Wolf a secret when by this time half Wildersmoor knows it, and by to-morrow the other half will. No doubt old Peter is at this moment discussing the news with the servants, and will carry it back to North Rode when he drives you home."

"Exactly. I suppose Dr. McKie thought even a gain of a few hours might be something, though I don't see what difference it can possibly make when the poor fellow is tied here by his broken leg. Perhaps the doctor imagined Cyril would think it his duty to inform the police. There he is mistaken, Cyril would do no such thing. He would merely rush over to the Wolf and preach repentance—that is all."

"He would believe John Ulyett guilty?"

"Of course. That is the distinction between a parson and a scientist. The parson believes everyone—either actually or potentially—guilty of every sin. The scientist believes in no sin save one—the sin of opposing him."

"I hold with the parson—all things considered. Though it would be hard on Jack Ulyett to be exhorted to repentance as a murderer if, as we all think, he is perfectly innocent."

"Well," said Nina reflectively, "I don't know that that matters much. If a man has not committed the particular wrongdoing you are aiming at, it is pretty safe to say he has done lots of other things quite as bad."

"Still it is not the same thing. One would not care to be accused of anything of which one was incapable—theft, for instance."

"True. I am wrong. But if Cyril hears of all this

he will certainly take his innings, and I do not blame him. Most people's sins are so silly and monotonous that it must be a real pleasure to discover a murderer among one's acquaintances. Anyway, poor Jack Ulyett is safe for to-night; I never preach."

CHAPTER XXXIV

THUS it happened that Ulyett had a visitor that evening, a visitor whom Vose ushered upstairs with grave satisfaction and extreme politeness. The landlord of the Grey Wolf was gratified that Mrs. Paton should take a friendly interest in his unlucky guest, and himself carried the basket upstairs also, regardless of Nina's assurances that it could go anywhere.

"Happen Mr. Ulyett 'ud like to see what Mrs. Fleming has sent him, afore William puts th' things i' th' pantry," Vose replied, courteous but resolute, edging sideways up the narrow staircase.

Ulyett was lying with his face turned towards the open window and the dark moorland beyond. To the left the lights of the Hall could be seen. Perhaps he was looking at them. The room was comfortable; rather large, with a sloping roof; a red drugget covered the floor, the walls had a cheerful if somewhat violent paper. A lamp stood on a table by the bedside, and a little pile of newpapers lay by the lamp.

At Vose's knock Ulyett turned his head, expecting to see Granny Darlow.

"Mrs. Paton! How truly kind of you! I suppose McKie told you I was here?"

"Now do not try to sit up," said Nina, "I am sure you ought not. I have been dining at the Hall, and

thought I would come and tell you all the news before I drove home."

"They are back then?" asked Ulyett, meaning Frances and Quentin.

"This afternoon. Dr. McKie and I were at the Hall to meet them. I found him rather low-spirited, but he cheered up when our bride and bridegroom arrived."

"McKie is a good old chap," said Ulyett.

Vose set down the basket in the middle of the floor, placed a chair for Nina, and withdrew.

"That basket is full of good things for you," she said, "Vose insisted on bringing it upstairs. Frances and I have packed it. I trust you feel duly honoured."

"I am very grateful. This sort of thing makes a fellow feel less of an outcast. It is awfully good of you to come and see me, Mrs. Paton. I sent a note to Fleming this evening. Do you happen to know if he got it?"

"Oh, yes, he said he should see you to-morrow. I think he would have come to-night if he had not been obliged to go to Woffendale, because Mr. Fleming senior is ill."

"Old Elkanah?—why, what's the matter? I caught a glimpse of him this morning and he looked all right then."

"He had a fit this afternoon, from over-excitement, I believe."

Ulyett looked thoughtful.

"What was the old boy excited about?"

"Nobody knows exactly, but Dr. McKie is attending him."

"Any other news? What is the chief gossip in Woffendale just now?"

"Well, I think the Fleming wedding and your cousin's approaching one. I suppose you have heard of that?"

"She wrote and told me. Crosier is the man, isn't he? Poor chap!"

"Not so. He is very lucky. A good living and an excellent wife—what more could Curate desire? What puzzles everybody is how he got the living."

"Interest somehow."

"He says he has none."

"Then somebody wants to get him out of the way—or my cousin Esmé. Were they engaged before he got the living?"

"Not actually engaged, but everyone expected it. I rather helped on the engagement. I was so dreadfully afraid she would marry Mr. Fleming."

Ulyett burst out laughing.

"What!—old Elkanah? That is just like Esmé."

"Oh, no, I meant Quentin Fleming."

"Quentin!—*Quentin!* Never! He was always at the Avelands'—always. He never thought of Esmé. Besides, she intended to marry Ralph."

He pronounced the name easily enough, Nina wondered whether he knew of what he was suspected.

"Perhaps so," she replied, "but afterwards, when Ralph Fleming was gone, I certainly thought and still think, that there was some idea of Quentin taking his cousin's place."

"It was never Fleming's idea. It might have been Esmé's;" Ulyett spoke meditatively.

"Really I ought to apologize for these remarks concerning your cousin."

"Don't mention it," Jack responded cheerfully, "the

relationship isn't my fault. Please tell me some more. What you say is throwing a deal of light on things. I begin to understand."

"There is nothing more to tell. Miss Rusholme gave me the impression of intending to marry Quentin Fleming, and Mrs. Holt seemed to be aiding her."

"I've no doubt of it. Just what the old girl would do. When did Esmé accept Crosier?"

"Just after the Fleming wedding. He got his living about that time. I assure you, Mr. Ulyett, they are admirably suited. Esmé is quite the ideal woman for the post of Vicaress and Lady Paramount of the village. She will rejoice in mothers' meetings, and clothing-clubs, and all the rest of the civilized savagery. Now, Mr. Ulyett, do not repeat that last remark of mine."

The light of laughter came into Jack's eyes.

"I will not, Mrs. Paton. And I entirely agree. But uncivilized savagery is a trifle worse."

"Is it? I doubt it. At least you need not pretend you like it. You can thresh around, and that is a grand safety-valve. Othello in the stress of domestic life seems to have found solace from the recollection that he had once beaten a Venetian."

"I see. Yes, I admit there is consolation in beating one's Venetian now and then."

"Your cousin Esmé will never wish for a Venetian to beat. This present evil world satisfies her in every respect. She will be perfectly happy, and so will Mr. Crosier. It is an excellent arrangement."

"It is," Ulyett assented. "Now I perfectly comprehend the general state of affairs. Do not go yet, Mrs. Paton," Nina had risen from her chair; "I am

sure I have not heard half the news. And I have not asked after your husband."

"He is very well, thank you. I left him writing his sermon."

"More power to his elbow! Perhaps I shall be sending for him—in his priestly capacity."

"He will be very pleased to come," Nina replied; and then they both laughed at the possible interpretation of the words. "I do not mean that," protested Nina; "you know I only meant politeness."

"Quite so. But I don't suppose my tether will be long. Come and see me again, Mrs. Paton. By-and-by I shall go out and give no more trouble to anybody. Think of me as well as you can."

"Indeed I have never thought badly of you."

"That is more than I deserve." He hesitated a moment and then said, "Have you told me all the recent gossip?"

"I think so," Nina wondered for an instant whether he alluded to the accusation hanging over him, but she supposed he did not yet know that. "Our chief events have been Dr. Aveland's death, and then Frances' marriage."

"I was very sorry to hear of Dr. Aveland's death. I had a great respect for him."

"So had I. He leaves a dreadful blank. I miss him more as time goes on. Good-bye, Mr. Ulyett."

"It was awfully good of you to come. Is there a light on the stairs? I'll ring for Vose to hold this lamp for you."

"Vose has considerately hung a stable lantern on the curve of the stair-rail," said Nina, opening the door and peering down. "It is delightfully archaic.

Certainly I will come and see you again. Good-night!"

Then Ulyett turned his face again to the night and fell to pondering over his cousin's letter. Mrs. Paton's account of the country-side gossip by no means agreed with Esmé's. Quentin Fleming could not be pointed at as Ralph's probable murderer, or surely Nina Paton would have known. Perhaps she did not mention it, he being Quentin's friend. Yet that would be a reason for doing so. But Vose had accepted John's denunciation of his guest without the slightest hesitation; another argument contrary to Esmé's statements. Anyway, her evident animus against Fleming was explained. That had puzzled Ulyett when he read her letter. Now it was all clear—except the matter of Ralph's death. How much did Esmé know? How much did she guess? Whether she knew little or much, she meant evil to Quentin and his wife. It was well that he—Jack Ulyett—had followed his own impulses and returned before death made him helpless. There was yet time to render suspicion powerless for ever. Thinking this, Jack smiled quietly to himself, muttered something about being "a rummy sort of guardian angel," and being weak and easily tired, fell asleep.

By-and-by Vose came in, treading softly. He bent over the sleeper a moment, shook his head and moved away to the table whereon the papers lay beside the lamp, copies of the *Woffendale Star,* bearing dates of eight months previous. They were the papers which Vose had kept and for which Ulyett had asked. The landlord of the Wolf folded them carefully, shook his head again, and put them in his pocket. He then took

out of the Hall basket a bottle of wine and one or two other things. These he placed on the table, doing all with a lightness and quietness surprising in a man of his build and weight. He had about completed his arrangements when the door opened softly and Granny Darlow appeared, trim and neat in the old village dress of an elderly woman, the dress she always wore and that is now so rarely seen. A black gown, with white kerchief over the shoulders and pinned across the bosom, white frilled cap, and strong shoes with steel buckles. This was her Sunday garb. On week days Granny's gown was dark cotton, with a coloured cotton kerchief, or, in winter, a little woollen shawl. To-night, however, though not Sunday, was an occasion demanding gala dress. When Granny helped to nurse gentry, she felt it due both to herself and them to wear Sunday garments.

She came into the room as quietly as Vose had done. He pointed to the things on the table and to the sleeper. Granny nodded comprehension, and seated herself in a chair by the bed—a motionless little figure with bright black eyes. Then Vose picked up the basket and went away, closing the door behind him. Downstairs William was stolidly serving several men with beer. He looked up as the landlord appeared.

"Blind John just come," he observed laconically, and jerked his thumb in the direction of the Snug.

John was in his usual chair by the fire, his stick between his knees, his mug of "sixpenny" on the table beside him. Only one other man was in the Snug, and apparently John was beginning the tale of his identification of Ulyett.

"I know a lot and him one of these days, I——"

"John," said Vose's grave voice in the doorway, "I am na blaming thee fur what thou hast done, seeing it wur but natural. 'Tis hard fur a mon wi' no light in his eyes to shift for hissen; therefore I say naught as to how tha earned owd Elkanah's money this afternoon."

"It wur nobbut half o' th' reward," interrupted John, "nobbut half! Some woman had getten half fro' Elkanah afore I coom, an' I'll lay my life it wur that besom Rossela."

"Well," resumed Vose, "th' half 'll make thee comfortable fur thy owd age, an' I dunnot blame thee, being blind as thou art. But mark this, John, so long as Mr. Ulyett stays here at th' Wolf, thou shalt speak naught of him while thou art in the Wolf too. If thou conna hold thy peace about him and his business within these here walls, thou mun stay outside 'em. For if so be as I hear thee speaking of him or of aught concerning him here at th' Wolf, I'll not ha' thee at th' Wolf. When he is gone, tha con chunner thy fill. Till then tha mun either shut thy mouth while thou art here, or go thy ways. Dost thou understand?"

"Ay, I con understand well enow," a trifle sulkily; "but it's all o'er th' place already."

"Th' place dunnot belong to me," replied Vose with massive decision, "an' the Wolf does. I care nowt what's all o'er th' place. It's th' Wolf I'm talking on, an' mind thee doesna forget what I say."

John was not likely to forget. To be compelled to silence on a topic of such interest was hard indeed; but he could discuss it outside, and anything was better than quarrelling with Vose, for exclusion from the Grey Wolf meant social death to Blind John. It was

his club, his shooting-box, the goal of his day's labour. He collected all the gossip of the moor, and retailed it there; in return carrying the news of the outside world to the scattered farms. He would lose half his importance if he lost the right of entrance to the Snug.

"If thou wants to hustle th' gentleman out o' th' road o' th' police, tha con count on me, Vose," said the other man, the man who was listening to John when Vose came in. He was a notorious poacher.

"Thank ye, Jim. I might want help. I conna tell yet. Most like not; but I might."

"Well, tha knows wheer to find me. I'm used to dodging them police chaps."

CHAPTER XXXV

MRS. HOLT—in a chastened and loquacious mood—met Fleming and McKie at the door of the Woffendale drawing-room.

"Still unconscious, Dr. McKie. I am glad you are back again, Quentin. I am sure it is quite time, with your poor uncle in such a state."

"Well," he replied good-humouredly, "I could hardly have come much sooner, considering he was only taken ill this afternoon."

"Was it this afternoon? I do not remember. In affliction time is not. Is your wife with you?"

"No. She wished to come, but I considered there was no necessity for her to do so."

"Dear Esmé is here," Mrs. Holt went on, not having civility enough to say anything courteous about Frances, but wishing to impress upon Quentin the mistake he had made in not marrying her favourite. "What we should do without dear Esmé I cannot imagine. What a loss her marriage will be to us all —so devoted—so good—so——"

"I think I will go upstairs now, and see my uncle."

Mrs. Holt gazed rather blankly after Quentin as he went out of the room, followed by McKie. There was a tone in the younger Fleming's voice which she had not before heard from him, and which reminded her of Elkanah when he happened not to be pleased.

In truth, Quentin's patience was not to be relied

upon that evening. As he went up the wide shallow stairs he thought various things of Mrs. Holt, and none of them polite. The condition in which he found his uncle did not tend to soothe him. Had Elkanah Fleming been conscious, Quentin would have known what had been said by the old man's unexpected visitors that day, and so might have been able to nip all inquiry till Ulyett was safely out of the way. But with Elkanah lying there in stupor, what could be done? There was nothing but to sit down and await developments.

Esmé was there, sitting by the bedside. She rose as the two men entered, and listened to McKie's remarks upon his patient with a really excellent air of deprecating attention and subdued capability, mingled with a certain triumphant importance peculiar to women of her calibre on the eve of marriage. They have run so many risks, have striven so very hard. For some odd reason offers do not come readily to those who greatly desire them; therefore it is no wonder that Esmé and her sisters behave as though singing the song of Hannah, "I have gotten a man from the Lord."

Esmé contrived to have a word alone with Fleming before he left the house, before indeed he left Elkanah's room, for she called him back from the door.

"I hear that I have to congratulate you, Esmé," he said, returning, "and I do so most heartily. Crosier is a capital fellow."

"Thank you, Quentin," with the sidelong glance peculiar to her, and which Fleming so much disliked; "I am certainly to be congratulated. I shall marry a good man," emphasizing the adjective. "But I wished

to speak to you about my cousin Jack. Have you seen him? Of course you are aware he has come back?"

"I have not seen him."

Esmé was puzzled and annoyed. Like all persons of her type she was totally destitute of imagination, and therefore not capable of seeing far ahead. From plebeian feelings of low spite and mean revenge she had written to Ulyett that Quentin was suspected of Ralph Fleming's murder, and would probably be arrested on his return home. Also, she had expressed the hope that Ulyett was not, on the West Coast, amenable to English law, lest he should be called back as a witness; which would be so very unpleasant considering the assistance he had received from Quentin—assistance that would certainly be regarded as a bribe to silence. In thus writing, Esmé had calculated on Jack's mingled rage and dismay causing him to reply immediately, becoming explanatory in his surprised anger—so explanatory that the letter could be sent, accidentally of course, to a man in Woffendale who hated the whole Fleming family, and who, therefore, could be trusted to stir up the police far more effectually than they would ever bestir themselves.

If, however, Jack kept silence, why then it would clearly be Esmé's duty to mention her suspicions to old Elkanah Fleming before she left Woffendale, lest some innocent person be suspected. But she had never dreamt of Ulyett's prompt return, and was puzzled by it. Not afraid. Oh no, persons like Esmé Rusholme are never afraid of anything. And they are perfectly right. Nothing will ever seriously injure them in mind, body or estate. Are they not brands kept for the burning? Esmé was not afraid, only her

cousin's unexpected appearance, together with the elder Fleming's illness, upset her plans. She must see Jack herself and find out his reason for returning. And she further resolved that if Quentin's guilt was not yet common gossip it very soon should be. Still, she wanted a few points cleared up.

"Before poor Mr. Fleming was taken ill," she said, looking towards the silent figure on the bed, "he was very excited by two people who came to see him from Wildersmoor, a woman and a blind man."

"Both from Wildersmoor?"

"I believe they said so to the servant who showed them in. I was not here at the time. Mrs. Holt can tell you. But I wish to know if Jack sent them?"

"Ulyett? no, I should say not. Impossible!"

"Why impossible?" in her prim, chilly, irritating manner. "Mrs. Holt has heard from one of the maids whose brother is a railway guard, that a gentleman broke his leg at Wildersmoor station this morning, and was taken to the inn close by. I think that must have been Jack, and these people his messengers."

It was a natural supposition on her part, and Fleming chafed against the necessity that compelled him to evade and dodge. Was it worth while to descend to all this miserable shiftiness? Why not walk to the nearest police station and give himself up? Probably he would be compelled to do that in a day or two. Why not now? But Frances was at the Hall expecting his return, and as yet knowing nothing, and the need might not arise after all. Ulyett might not be arrested. So Quentin replied with a question.

"Why should he send messengers here?" Esmé shot another sidelong glance at him.

"Because Jack may have something important to communicate respecting poor Ralph's murder. I feel sure the gentleman hurt at Wildersmoor is Jack, and I am coming to the inn to see him, subject of course, to Mr. Crosier's approval."

This with extreme affectation of meekness.

"Then I suppose we shall be seeing you and Crosier at the Hall?" Fleming edged towards the door as he spoke. "Crosier used to drop in pretty often in my bachelor days."

"Thank you, Quentin, but our visit to Wildersmoor will probably be rather hurried. We both have so many arrangements to make," with a simper. Esmé was oddly old-fashioned in some of her ways.

"Naturally. Good-night Esmé."

McKie was waiting for him downstairs, listening to Mrs. Holt, whose conversation possessed interest for the doctor just now. He wanted to know all that Elkanah Fleming had said previous to his attack, and Mrs. Holt was recollecting more fragments to be pieced together.

"Several times he mentioned John Ulyett's name, Dr. McKie, though what that worthless fellow has to do with these people coming, and with my poor nephew's death, I really cannot imagine. But no doubt Elkanah's brain was becoming confused. I have always told him that such giving way to excitement was positively sinful."

McKie repeated this to Quentin when they got outside.

"So ye see, she just knows naething," he added, "and so much the better. What did that hizzy say to ye upstairs?"

Quentin told him.

"Weel, she's ower deep for me. There's something she wants to see Ulyett about, and she'll not take Crosier with her. What it is I canna guess. I have no opinion whatever of Miss Esmé. But perhaps she means to warn him, being his cousin. Yet it might be the reverse; I canna tell. Shall ye see him to-night?"

"I think not. He mentioned to-morrow in his note. How is my uncle?"

"I think badly of him—verra badly. He's auld, ye see, Quentin, and one canna mend that. I shall look in there again later. Here is the station, and I'll leave ye now. I'll be over early to-morrow to see Ulyett."

"Come to breakfast, doctor."

"Thank ye. Mayhap I will."

Fleming got into an empty carriage and sat looking into the night as the Wildersmoor train slowly clanged round the Pike's shoulder. He remembered the night—not many months ago—when returning from Woffendale by that same train, he had thought over Esmé's veiled threats, and resolved to fight to the end. Now he was married, and were it possible, he would fight harder than ever, for a blow struck at him must needs also smite Frances. Yet what could he do? Let Ulyett be arrested? Impossible. It was fate that struck him—fate using various shapes; first the woman who had seen old Elkanah that afternoon. Quentin rightly guessed her to be Rossela Darlow, who probably knew when Ulyett came to Woffendale to see Ralph Fleming, having a grievance against him. Then Ulyett himself; and Blind John. Surely the demoniac spirit with which Jeffries credits inanimate nature

must have suddenly possessed the wood of the Wildersmoor platform and the wood and iron of Ulyett's train, that he should miss his footing and break his leg; thus drifting to the Grey Wolf—the one house in the world where his blind guide would hear and recognize him. There yet remained the one chance—Quentin hated himself for thinking of it—that if Elkanah Fleming died, Ulyett might go free; for the police might not care to take action merely on John's word when Quentin did not stir in the matter. There was Rossela, certainly. What had Rossela said? Probably all she wanted was money from Elkanah. No doubt she had got it, and the matter would end there, so far as she was concerned. She would not gain more by handing Ulyett over to the police. At this point the train rounded the Pike and the soft fresh moorland air smote Quentin's face. Should he tell his wife or not? Better not. Perhaps she need never know. Yet in the event of Ulyett's arrest the secret would come out barely—suddenly. Better tell her. Aveland had heard it and had not shrunk away, and Aveland's daughter saw all things with her father's eyes. Here Fleming caught himself wishing for the dead man back again. Aveland was the sort of man to be remembered in time of trouble, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land of heat and barrenness. Scarred and smitten the rock might be, but in its shadow was rest. Quentin had not missed him much. A young man does not miss his elders. Had all things gone smoothly with him, the memory of Aveland would have become as a pleasant tale that is told—no more. Now with the threatening storm, the dead man assumed loftier stature in the eyes of those he had

left behind, needing the shelter only he could have afforded. He was no longer "poor Aveland," sick and surely dying, but Aveland of the delicate honour, the capable brain, the compassionate heart—and above all, the unchangeableness which is the rarest attribute of humanity. Quentin had felt so sure of his own capacity for protecting his wife from all the chances of this mortal life. Yet now, little more than two months since Aveland's death, sore need had arisen for his presence. Unspeakably thankful would Fleming have been to know that Aveland was still at Sandhayes; not lying in North Rode churchyard. There was McKie, certainly. He would do his best to take care of Frances while—if he, Quentin, exchanged his home for Woffendale gaol. There were the Patons, too. But what were all these compared to the dead father? Nothing—nothing at all. And the train clanged on monotonously, "nothing—nothing at all!" —till it came to a confused rattling standstill at Wildersmoor station.

The hamlet kept early hours. There were no lights in the cottages. The Grey Wolf alone showed cheerful glimmers above and below. The faint shining above was in Ulyett's room, where Granny sat vigilant. That below, glowing through red curtains, was the lamp that Vose kept burning all night long on the high old-fashioned chimney-piece. The whole year round that lamp burnt steadily, sending a ray into the darkness when every other house was dark and silent. When questioned as to his reason for maintaining this semi-Rosicrucian custom, Vose merely replied "that his father had done it. Leastways, th' owd chap had burnt a rushlight, which coom to th' same thing. And

as theer wur no reason against it, he—Vose—had kept it up. And he'd found it rare an' convenient at times to ha' a light handy."

Fleming turned his back upon the Wolf and walked slowly home. The Hall sparkled with lights, there was no gloom save in the heart of its master. His wife was sitting in the room that had been especially his mother's. The long windows opened down into the gardens at the back of the house, where the rising ground of the Pike had admitted of terraces being made. The windows were both open this warm night, the lamplight streaming out over the flower-beds. A curiously-mingled scent of jasmine and fern floated in with the cool air. Frances sat reading, half in light, half in shadow; the cat Ptolemy, on the table beside her, the terrier at her feet. Something in the way the light fell on her—something in the turn of the head, reminded her husband of the last time he had seen Aveland alive; that last evening at Sandhayes, when Aveland sat writing between lamplight and starlight, the cat stretching its sleek black length along the table as now it lay by Frances; the dusk outside, the cool air—all were the same, save that here there was no beating of the surf, like the heart of the world pulsing in the gloom. For a moment Quentin wished his wife were not so like her father. The likeness smote him with compunction. It seemed in some subtle manner to give her a double personality and yet to emphasize her loneliness; as though Quentin brought to the dead man news of evil for his child against which he was powerless to guard her. Even as the thought passed through Fleming's mind she turned and saw him standing in the doorway.

CHAPTER XXXVI

"I DID not hear you come in, Quentin," said Frances, smiling. "You look tired. I will ring for coffee."

"No, thank you"—he crossed the room and sat down near her. "Where is Mrs. Paton?"

"She has gone home. Mr. Paton did not come, so she preferred not to wait. She had the pony-carriage, you know, and old Peter. Before she left she went to see Mr. Ulyett."

"Did she?" Fleming was surprised. It never occurred to him that anyone would care to see Ulyett. Your opinion of a man depends on the moments in which you look at him. Not your moments; his moments. Nina regarded Jack Ulyett as he was in those brief intervals when some sudden mood lifted him above the mire into which he continually fell; whereas Quentin naturally surveyed him as he sat in the puddle. To Nina, Jack was a good comrade, gentle, soft-voiced, reliable. To Fleming, he was an idle, worthless fellow, only to be assisted because he was an old playmate; because as boys, they had gone mackerel fishing together in a crazy old boat, when they had to bail out the water while Ralph—who made a third—sat quietly catching the fish; and because of many other similar expeditions. Curious how things like these dwell in the memory. Therefore there was

kindly feeling between Quentin and Jack. Yet Fleming was genuinely astonished by Nina's call at the Grey Wolf.

"Did she say how Ulyett was?"

"She told me he seemed very comfortable, but ill. Vose was looking after him in the most fatherly manner, and had sent for Granny Darlow to sit up with him. Nina and I packed a basket with various things. How is Mr. Fleming?"

"He is not conscious. Mrs. Holt talked a good deal. So did Esmé Rusholme, who is there, you know. McKie thinks seriously of the attack. By the way, he will be here to breakfast to-morrow."

"I suppose Dr. McKie is coming to see his patient at the Wolf. I am sorry your uncle is so ill, Quentin. Was anything said about Blind John's visit to him."

"Nothing of any consequence. But John himself will talk—and others. Esmé says she shall go to the Wolf to see her cousin. That appears a natural thing to do, but I distrust her."

"For her own sake she would not help to betray him."

"No. But she has a motive which I do not understand. Of that I am sure. She is dangerous. Your father and I discussed this the night before he died. I wish she and Crosier had been married and gone before Ulyett returned."

"My father discussed all this?" said Frances, in astonishment. "Then perhaps it was he who got the living for Mr. Crosier. The patron was an old friend of father's. The thought did cross my mind when I heard of the appointment, but as he had never men-

tioned the matter in any way, nor seemed to take any interest either in the Rusholmes or Mr. Crosier, my idea seemed only a fancy. I remember that a letter was posted that night; could it have been to ask for the living?"

"I have no doubt it was so." Fleming got up and walked to the open window, looking out into the dusky garden. He saw how Aveland's last act had been an effort to protect his child from the possibility of the storm that now darkened above her. Quentin turned from the window, and sat down by his wife's side.

In times of stress, one becomes more observant. Quentin was more sensible than ever of her grave beauty while he strove to think of some way of telling her the true history of Ralph's death.

"Why," she asked, lifting puzzled eyes to his, "did my father consider Esmé Rusholme dangerous?"

"Because she either knew, or guessed,. who had killed Ralph. She told me so by hints that I could not mistake. And she had a great dislike to me. Your father knew all this. We were talking together that last night. I told him everything."

When anyone has lived in clear openness, having nothing to conceal, anything secret is peculiarly distasteful. Frances intuitively felt the shadow of knowledge which concerned her, and yet had been hidden from her. Whatever it was, why had she not known it? Then she looked at Quentin's troubled face.

"Dear, if it troubles you to tell me, do not. I have little curiosity. No doubt my father would have told me had he thought it best that I should know."

"We both thought you need never know," replied her husband with a groan, "and you need never have

known but for this unlucky return of Ulyett's. At any moment he may be arrested—and I cannot let him be arrested."

"Could we not manage his escape if that is all?"

"Yes, but he would not be able to return here, and I have no right to keep a man in hiding because it would make things easy for me. I have been wondering for the last four hours how I should tell you, and I have no better idea now than when I began. But there is only one thing for me to do——"

Here, to Quentin's surprise, his wife suddenly asked,

"If you did nothing—said nothing, would your silence cause Mr. Ulyett's arrest?"

"No; but my speaking would destroy the possibility of it."

Frances pondered a moment, turned a shade paler—her glowing colour had faded in the last few minutes—a slow, dimly-felt conviction was taking possession of her.

"How did your cousin die? And what had Esmé Rusholme to do with it?"

"Esmé, I think, would have married Ralph, so naturally she felt resentment towards the man who unwittingly caused his death. That is all as far as she is concerned. How pale you look, my darling!"

"Never mind me. You said she knew the man?"

"Well, she has hinted it. Sometimes I have thought it merely a guess—sometimes people guess aright. I do not know. Ralph's death was accidental. I swear it! Don't look like that. We quarrelled, and he struck me. I struck back, and walked away, never dreaming I had done him any serious hurt. When

he was brought to the Hall I was so amazed and bewildered at the unexpectedness of it that—as I told your father—I turned coward and kept silence. I told him none knew the truth, unless Esmé's hints meant that she did. But I could not imagine either how she knew, or why she guessed. The man who crossed the moor was Ulyett, but your father and I thought he would never be identified. That is all."

He finished with a sudden flatness in his voice. Good voices, to sensitive ears, reveal every mood of their owners. It is only the toneless ones that puzzle, because their sound is the same whether uttering harmless platitudes or the blackest treachery. Quentin's was a perpetual echo of his spirit, and now took the flat dulness of dreary expectation. For however he might strive to show a gallant front, it is not precisely exhilarating to contemplate one's own condemnation by one's dearest, with the tolerable certainty of a felon's cell to follow.

"Oh, my dear, I am so sorry for you!"

"Are you?" Fleming was young; his spirits went up with a bound under the stimulus of these words, and the soft clasp of a cool white hand on his hot clenched ones. "Are you?—then I don't care a hang!"

Here the unfortunate nature of the expression struck him, and he flushed dark red, hoping his wife had not noticed.

"We shall get over it," he went on, his voice taking its natural ring. "I shall not be away long. A Woffendale jury is not likely to be very hard on me."

"There is the judge."

"Well, yes, there is the judge," he admitted. "I must chance that. Perhaps the jury will let me off! Who knows?"

"Mr. Ulyett may not be arrested. Surely, Quentin, you need not speak unless he is?"

"I suppose not. But I had thought of making a clean breast of it at the Woffendale police-station to-morrow. One may as well get it over. I could not stand many more days like this."

He spoke easily—frankly, deceived as to his wife's real feelings by her apparent calm.

"I hope you will not do that, Quentin. I am sure it would be a great mistake. Mr. Ulyett may not be arrested, may not even be seriously suspected. Your uncle is too ill to do anything, and by the time he is sufficiently recovered to think of these matters, who can tell how things may have changed. As far as I understand, there is no one to actually order the arrest, and it is just possible that Blind John's statement may never reach the ears of the police. I beg of you not to act hastily. Besides, you have arranged to see Mr. Ulyett to-morrow. He may himself have something to say. Your uncle needs you now that he is helpless. There remains Esmé Rusholme. Yet she may not know. In any case——"

Frances' voice died away. This thing had come suddenly upon her. She needed a little time—a breathing space wherein to look steadfastly at this shadow that had so swiftly arisen.

"No, I am not ill," she said in reply to Quentin's self-reproaches; "I am only a trifle bewildered. I suppose it is because I have never before had anything

to fight against. Things have hitherto gone so smoothly with me, and I have as yet hardly realized this. Of course, an innocent man must not suffer, but I cannot see the necessity for your speaking unless he is directly accused—I really cannot, Quentin."

Fleming stooped and kissed his wife's hand.

"It shall be as you wish. Perhaps my idea was hasty. I will see Ulyett the first thing to-morrow. I don't suppose, however, that he has a notion of the suspicion attaching to himself. He was out of England, you know, when all the search was made. Somebody may have sent him a paper though. Would you like to send for Mrs. Paton?—to stay here, I mean. I should not mind your telling her if it would be any relief to you to talk it over with her."

"No, dear, thank you. It would not be any relief. Putting things into words only makes them worse as a rule. Besides, though I am quite sure of Nina's loyalty, I think a secret is best kept by few knowing it. Its possession would be a trouble and anxiety to her, having to keep it from her husband."

"I forgot Paton. He will probably soon know all though in any case. I am afraid there is no way out of it. For your sake, how I wish there were!"

"I suppose," in rather an unsteady voice, "that the best lives always suffer. If one looks back through the ages, all the best men and women have suffered much one way or another. I suppose one ought not to cry out, thinking of those others."

"I don't know," said Quentin, ruefully; "another fellow's toothache may be worse than mine, but that does not make mine any better. However, don't you fret, darling. I shall dree my weird and come out all

right. I wonder what sort of work they will put me to. Stone-breaking?" He stretched out one arm and threw his head back. "I think I could make the bits fly!"

Frances checked him by a swift gesture.

"Don't, Quentin! I cannot bear it."

"Well, darling, I won't. But the old times were better in crises of life. Then there was always a refuge. If you killed a man by accident, you paid a fine to Holy Church and fought niggers. All of which seems to me much more reasonable than shutting a man up to useless toil."

He ended with a stifled half-gasp half-groan. The sudden exhilaration was vanishing, and ugly reality crowded on his mind. His wife's voice recalled him from a vision of himself in a felon's dress.

"There may be a way, we cannot tell. Let us keep hope as long as it will stay with us, not thrust it out. There must be a way, Quentin."

"The only way is for nothing to happen, for suspicion to die out," said Fleming gloomily.

"And that is possible—quite possible."

The piteous eagerness in Frances' voice had never been there before. She herself was painfully conscious of it, and tried to speak in more hopeful ordinary tones. When a hitherto untroubled life is smitten the general opinion is that the smiting is eminently wholesome—especially if the smitten life is young and of promise. Pulling at a bramble is not much fun; but how pleasant to give an oak sapling an ugly twist that is likely to remain, and how annoyed we are if the sapling turns itself straight again. It never occurs to us to express regret at the checking of that fair

strong upward life. So in like manner was it a pity that Frances' serene aspiring existence should be thus suddenly shadowed. That sort of thing does no good to a sensitive nature; it is merely the twist in the tree; a pain, a check, and a remembered bitterness.

CHAPTER XXXVII

ALL through the quiet summer night Frances thought, hoped, despaired; then hoped again: all the while seeing clearly there was no honourable way out of the coil save the way of confession, of which Quentin himself spoke. When the stars faded she rose and dressed, feeling the need of solitude in the open—that outlying portion of Paradise which is not closed to us. Fleming was sleeping soundly and dreamlessly. He was quite certain Ulyett would be arrested, consequently he had no doubts as to what would be his own fate; and so he slept well. A vivid imagination is not always a blissful possession. Frances looked at him and pictured him on a plank bed. She had never seen one, but that made no difference. Then she went softly out into the faint blue light of dawn.

The sky was clear and growing brighter every moment; but the hour was so early that the birds were not singing, only twittering sleepily, and the trees not yet awake. A thin white mist hung over the moor, obscuring outline and giving an air of fantastic unreality to the familiar landscape. In the near foreground were the dew-laden harebells—the true flower of the north; so delicate yet so hardy, expressing at once the northern poetic spirit and the northern strength; growing tall and giant-belled in the cool north air, dwindling to pigmy size in the south. There

is as much difference between the harebells north and south of Derby as between Great Tom of Lincoln and the muffin-man's little clapper. On Wildersmoor the harebells grow royally. From August to December they swing in the free breeze—a wild tangle of soft pale lavender-blue, changing to pure light when the sun strikes through them, as a blue diamond glitters.

This warm September dawn the bells hung heavy with dew; indeed they were not awake any more than the trees. Anyone who has watched the dawn miracle out of doors knows how deep in slumber are all things belonging to the day till the finger from the east touches them.

Frances had mechanically taken the moorland track that was nearest the Hall gates. After a few minutes she turned and looked back. The Hall, with the Pike rising behind it, was still visible through the mist, but blurred and shifting, the outlines lost. She sighed and walked on, trying not to think of that which had been her thought all night. She was seeking peace, composure, the soothing influence of wild nature. Then she would think again, and perhaps the calmer spirit might suggest better hope.

At last she came upon a fallen tree and sat down on it. To those who have lived close to nature there is when in trouble even a faint consolation to be derived from merely sitting on the rough trunk of a fallen tree. The thing is so absolutely without aggressiveness that its very harmlessness becomes friendly. It mutely invites us to rest, and there is no treachery in the invitation. We need not be on the alert to avoid a possible stab. In time of trouble too, the observing powers seem to be quickened. Frances, resting on the tree,

noted the roughness of the bark; here and there green with moss, here and there grey with lichen. On her left rose a little hillock all a-tangle with harebells, like a blue film over the green, and crowned with a bramble thicket mingled with honeysuckle and bracken. In front of her was more bracken, a tall clump of it, and further off, two or three beeches, dimly seen through the mist which in the crescent light became more luminous every moment. To Frances' troubled soul this shining summer mist, enclosing her on every side, was as the Pillar of Cloud that guarded Israel. For a little while it wrapped her round from the world as made by man.

Here was nothing to remind her of the evil of human life—that old serpent which for ever twists and writhes and wounds itself with its own venom. Here was no humanity, but only the rough clean sandy track, and deep wet moss, the tangle of bracken, and honeysuckle, and harebell; the growing light in the surrounding cloud. She sat there as motionless as though part of the dead tree, seeing all these things with the peculiarly vivid observance that comes in time of stress. Ever after she could recall wellnigh every leaf and twig on which her eyes rested, though she was never able to find that particular spot again.

A light steady tapping sounded in the stillness, a tapping on wood. It was a woodpecker in one of the beeches, a bird seeking its morning meal. To the tapping of the woodpecker Frances went over all the reasons for and against the confession that her husband wished to make that morning. To what end? She asked herself this question, for as Quentin himself had said, there was no way out of it. Ulyett's

arrest could not be permitted. Was there any means of preventing it? Surely a sick man might be left in peace, free from any arrest save that inevitable arrest which comes to all. Ulyett was very ill, he might die. Then softly, gently slid the thought into Frances' mind—if only he would die before Quentin spoke! That would smooth all. If only Ulyett would die!

Nowadays to share the beliefs of our forefathers is regarded as a distinct sign of incipient idiocy. Yet the assumption that evil thoughts were directly inspired by the father of lies was certainly more courteous to human nature than the modern doctrine that they are microbes of our own raising. Frances was sufficiently modern even in her faith to ascribe all evil solely to herself, and even as the thought and wish clearly shaped themselves, just as clearly she became conscious that she was earnestly desiring the death of an innocent man that she and hers might dwell in peace.

"Yes," she said aloud, "he is my Uriah, the man in the way. He is in the front of the battle, and I am hoping that the sword of the sickness will slay him. I have come to this. I could not have believed that I could come to this—and so quickly!"

There is a good deal of education in earthquakes. Whether it is a kind of knowledge which profiteth, is another matter. This particular earthquake taught to Frances Fleming the truth that as by our affections we may be raised, so also by our affections we may be dragged down. The evil that a man or woman would not do for their own advantage, they will do without scruple for the sake of those dear to them. Everything, even the best and highest, has its black side—as heaven has hell. Every good impulse, every high

quality, may be twisted into a devil's weapon. There is none good, no, not one. Somewhere in the most splendid armour of righteousness there is the flaw—perhaps the only flaw; perhaps, happily, never to be tested. Yet it assuredly is there. Blessed indeed is the wearer, and powerful his guardian angel, if the circumstances of life are so arranged that the spear of temptation never touches that vulnerable spot. And blessed too are those who come out of the fight with their armour only dinted, not pierced through.

The mist round about became thinner—more translucent, as the light of dawn grew and spread over Wildersmoor. But Frances still sat and pondered, repentant of that sudden evil wish, and fearing the future. What she dreaded was possible change in Quentin should fate compel confession. No man comes out of prison precisely the same as he goes in. It might be comparatively easy for him to face it now, but how would he look back upon it? Would he become embittered by the terrible experience? Would he meet with ridicule and scoffing where now he had only honour?

A little breeze sprang up from seaward; the luminous mist lifted—dissolved—vanished in the glory of the risen sun; and all the world was sparkling green and full of song and life—infinitely joyous, as the Almighty meant it to be. Well indeed is it that Mother Nature consoles by her beauty—her eternal youth; for if she mourned with humanity the whole world would by this time resemble a railway yard! Luckily man is not the only denizen of this earth, and his wants and woes are by no means so important as he thinks. Nature has her elder children to sustain and make happy,

and cannot devote all her attention to the fretful whining of her youngest born—the prodigal amid his husks.

So the summer dawn broke divinely on Wildersmoor, as it had broken all through the centuries, no matter what sorrow it shone upon. Still Frances sat thinking—thinking. Blue dragonflies shot past; a bright-eyed inquisitive wagtail ventured near, glanced at her, and ran away with little short steps and dipping tail—not alarmed, but disdaining to waste time. A scarlet gleam floated by and settled on a willow twig; it was a tiger-moth sunning its black and scarlet and silver. When last she had seen one of those glowing little sparks of life her father had looked upon it too, standing beside her and repeating Keats' lines—

> "Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,
> As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings."

Memories like these bring the dead most vividly back, memories of trivial things. Those damask'd wings spread to the sunbeams brought her loss more keenly to mind than aught else could have done. She rose from her rough bark seat and looked towards the north-west with the vague instinct that urges all wounded animals to return to the place where they have known most peace. Sandhayes lay northwest. It was not visible from where she stood, yet Frances could see the old house clearly before her. Then she realized that Sandhayes no longer existed. The house was there, the empty shell; but that which had been Sandhayes—the pleasant life warmed and protected by her father's presence and affection—this had vanished, as had that father himself. There was no shelter from the storm. Nay, she herself must be the shelter; must think and

advise and decide what was best to be done, without having had any serious experience of life. Sandhayes was gone. She turned away and walked slowly homewards.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THAT same morning sun dazzled Vose's eyes as he stood at the door of the Grey Wolf sunning himself after breakfast, as was his custom summer and winter—weather permitting. Someone was coming from the Hall. Vose shaded his eyes with his hand, and perceiving that it was Quentin, advanced to meet him.

"A fine warm morning, sir!"

"It is," assented Fleming. "How is Mr. Ulyett?"

"Going on well, sir, and that wick! His spirit is wonderful considering th' awkwardness of things." Vose spoke with delicate emphasis.

"I trust the awkwardness will go no further," said Fleming. "Indeed, I will take care it does not."

Vose nodded.

"Naught o' harm 'll come to Mr. Ulyett at th' Wolf. You con make your mind easy about that, sir. If things get more awkwardlike, 'tis but me an' William putting Mr. Ulyett into a hay-cart and away o'er th' moor to a boat an' Man, wheer I've folk as 'll take care of him."

"You're a good fellow, Vose."

The landlord of the Grey Wolf was surprised. He confided to William that "Fleming thought a deal o' Ulyett—fur he wur quite took to."

William meditated.

"I con understond it," he answered at length. "Happen if a chap I loiked wur as near a rope as yon Ulyett, I'd be took to."

But the thought that had given such grateful earnestness to Quentin's voice had been of himself, not of Ulyett. If flight were possible to him—Fleming, would he find such ready, generous help? Assuredly, and he knew it. Vose and William and many more moorland folk would be prompt and willing to aid him, as they were aiding Ulyett, simply because they liked him; and also because the heart of man delighteth in evading a cast-iron law. By-and-by all this will go; it is passing away already. Men will become logical and cowardly, blind to all but the glitter of the thirty pieces.

Thus thinking of Vose and other humble friends, Quentin went up the narrow staircase with a softened feeling. Afterwards he was glad of this.

Ulyett looked more colourless than ever in the morning light, but his eyes were bright and his air cheerful.

"Got my note?" he asked. "Thank you for coming. I was on my way to see you, when I managed to break my leg and so got here." He glanced round the room. "Pretty comfortable, isn't it, Fleming? Not a bad place to die in."

"Don't say that. We will pull you round. I hope you are not worrying about Blind John's mistake. Of course, I shall put that right at once."

Ulyett regarded him with an odd smile:

"John is not mistaken. He led me to North Rode that night."

"I know. But it was I who struck Ralph down.

Not that I ever supposed it would hurt him. I kept silence, and thought it had all blown over—till last night. I shall give myself up to-day."

"That must not be—for your wife's sake. She must not know."

"She knows already. I have told her."

"When?" Ulyett spoke sharply, raising himself from his pillows.

"Last night."

Jack sank back again, muttering something that was evidently language.

"To think of you doing such a thing before you saw me! Why, man!—in any serious emergency of life you should always consult the most worthless friend you have. He will not betray your affairs because he has enough of his own to occupy him, and also because your tale—whatever it is—will not surprise him. He has long ago shocked himself out of all possibility of being shocked. Now listen, Fleming. When I parted from you that night I lost my way in the fog, walked somehow in a circle, and came upon you and Ralph quarrelling. That is, I heard your voices, and I went blundering off, as I didn't exactly want to meet Ralph just then. I ran up against an old woman—Granny Darlow, who is now nursing me devotedly," here Ulyett laughed. "Nursing me devotedly," he repeated. "Well, she put me in the right way once more. But you know, old chap, what a genius I have always had for going crooked! Of course I went wrong again, and finally stumbled on Blind John. You've heard the rest from him as far as North Rode. He thought I went by the Riverton train, but I went to Sandhayes, as I suppose you know.

I never imagined I should ever return, and I wanted to see Sandhayes once more."

Jack uttered the name softly—lingeringly, and a light began to dawn on his listener.

"Aveland was the soul of kindness as well as of honour," Ulyett went on. "He permitted me to come to his house, and I appreciated the permission. He was courtesy itself, the same to every guest. If he allowed a man to cross his threshold he treated that man as a friend. It was balm to my spirit when he kicked Ralph out. He never kicked out me. I am glad fate enables me to repay my debt to him in some sort."

A light dawned on Fleming. He began to regard Ulyett from another point of view—from Aveland's point of view. Certainly there had always been a pleasantness about Jack that had won him friends despite his worthlessness; had, for instance, induced Fleming to help him at a critical time. Yet Quentin had done that more because Jack was an old playmate than from any good opinion of Jack himself.

Ulyett continued:

"So I went to Sandhayes, being permitted; and then I walked to Riverton by the side of the line, and thence to Liverpool, feeling myself a comfortably dead man. Yes, that was it. I had died and was buried. I had managed to bury myself at last. Thanks to you, old fellow, I could pass the interval between death social and death physical in Africa, instead of in prison. There a Woffendale paper reached me. There was an account of Ralph's death in it, and the hue and cry after Blind John's vanished companion. I reflected a good deal as to whether a tramp had got hold of

Ralph, or whether your quarrel had grown more serious and you and he had come to blows. In the latter case I hoped suspicion might still attach itself to me. Then another paper came, which told me public interest in the case was dying, but that old Elkanah—excuse me, Fleming—your worthy uncle, had increased the offered reward."

"That did all the mischief," said Quentin. "It kept people on the look out. Blind John and Rossela Darlow got the reward—divided between them—yesterday afternoon, just before my uncle was taken ill."

"Upon my soul, that blind fellow ought to be much obliged to me! Why, I have made his fortune, and the woman's too. I never gave away so much in charity before. Never had the chance. Was always the receiver. Well, I was going to tell you how I came home. A letter reached me from my cousin Esmé. Is it permissible, I wonder, to call a woman names? If so, how many? And of what sort? The letter fetched me back. No, I have not got it to show you," seeing Fleming about to speak. "I reflected that it was rather an awkward document to be found on me if I happened to die before I reached home. So I burnt it. The gist of it was that suspicion pointed to you, and your arrest was expected daily."

"I cannot imagine," said Quentin, with astonished emphasis, "what object she could have had in writing that. So far as I know, I have never been suspected at all."

"So I find. What put the idea into Esmé's head? Was it simply a lucky shot?"

"Once or twice," said Fleming, slowly, "she has thrown out hints which might or might not imply

exact knowledge of Ralph's death. I thought they did, and therefore ignored them. Sometimes she even seemed to utter veiled threats. I have puzzled over them, yet have never come to any settled conclusion. I told Aveland that I believed she knew something of the truth, but how she came by the knowledge I had not the faintest idea."

"What did he say?"

"He thought that if she married Crosier she would not be dangerous to me, and he obtained that living for Crosier in the hope that Esmé would thus be safely got out of the way."

Ulyett nodded.

"That was clever of Aveland. But he could not know her malignancy as I do. The letter was her parting thrust, given because you very wisely declined to marry her."

"How——?"

"There, old fellow! Don't disturb yourself trying to frame an evasive reply. It is extremely civil of you, but I thoroughly understand my fair relative and see her little game from start to finish. I should have forbidden the banns anyhow. Now listen: Blind John and that woman Rossela have both denounced me, and I have practically told Vose I am the man who struck Ralph down. Also, I have written a confession, got Vose to witness it, and sent it to old Slough the lawyer, with instructions to open it when I am dead. So you see the situation remains where it was, and the story becomes complete with the final touch of my discovery and repentance."

"I cannot permit it," said Fleming, with a gasp of mingled amazement, remorse, and infinite relief. "For

what do you take me, Jack, that I should allow an innocent man to be branded for my deed? I——"

"My dear fellow, you cannot help yourself. You must inevitably leave things as I have arranged them. I have given you no choice, for I knew exactly what you would say. If you, in the face of my confession, proclaim yourself the man who killed Ralph, people will only suppose you have suddenly gone crazy. No one will believe you. Whereas everyone will believe me. Ah, people always strive to impress upon one the advantages of a good character; it seems to me there are considerable advantages going with a bad one."

Quentin laid his hand on the thin waxen one nearest to him.

"I thank you from my soul, Jack, but it cannot be. Wearing a convict's dress would not be half so humiliating to me as letting another man suffer in my stead."

"That's all right," said Ulyett, lightly, "nothing will fall upon me. I have got a through ticket to a place where the Comedy of Errors called Human Justice is never played. My reputation is the only thing that will suffer, and it is already so battered that an extra dint or two cannot matter. I have no near relatives—the Rusholmes are the nearest. My father and mother died when I was a little chap. So there are none to be troubled by my action in this matter. Whereas you——! However, you have no choice, as I said. You simply cannot help yourself. If you told the truth nobody would believe you. I have observed that is usually the case when one speaks the truth."

"You forget Esmé knows, and probably others; for how did she obtain her knowledge?"

"I do not think she knows. Her suspicions chanced to hit the mark—that was all. When she hears her own cousin is the culprit, she will not be inclined to speak of her former ideas. As for others, there are no others. Unless Granny Darlow overheard the quarrel. I stumbled over her, as I told you, when I sheered off from you and Ralph. If she knows, you can rely on her silence. She suspects something I feel sure, and is prepared to assist you to the utmost—even to helping me out of the world if necessary. I see in her eyes the look of the priest when he laid hands on the scapegoat."

"What——?"

"No, don't say anything to her. It is the old type. I don't know that we have improved upon it. We no longer murder for love or hate, but only for money or science. I prefer the older reasons. They afford surer footing all round."

"We will take you over to the Hall, Jack, and nurse you there. That woman shall not come near you again."

"I'd rather she did, thanks. I am not afraid, because I know my time is so short it is not worth her while to shorten it. She interests me. She reminds me of an old nigger woman who poisoned a Portuguese on the Coast. He had treated a daughter of hers very badly. Then he got fever and sent for this old woman to nurse him. Those fellows think that the blacks dare not revenge themselves. I went to see him on business, and the old negress was sitting by

him. There was a look in her eyes that impressed me at the time. Afterwards I recalled it when I heard she had poisoned him. Oh, it's a sweet hole—the Coast! And the population, black and white—especially the white—matches its climate. I don't wonder that the Almighty repented having made man, particularly after he became a little civilized."

Ulyett stopped suddenly, and fell back among his pillows. Fleming sprang up and poured out some wine.

"Drink this, Jack. Ought you to talk?"

"I like talking. And I am better to-day. By the way, McKie sent me some stuff to take. I believe it is there somewhere. No, I don't want it now. In fact, I don't want it at all. Pour a dose of it into those flower-pots on the sill. It will do just as much good there, and the dear old boy will never know. Macbeth was the only man who had sensible ideas about physic, though I think his plan of throwing it to the dogs was rough on the animals. What was I talking about? Oh, the Coast. Yes, it *is* a hole! But it was the only place for me. I am a failure all round, Fleming. I should have done better had I been a bigger scamp. I was only a mediocre one. There is the secret of my failure. Did it ever strike you how useful some worthless lives are?"

"Not worthless."

"Yes, worthless. Shreds and tatters. Dummies to draw the bullet that else might lay a better man low. I might have been a respectable member of society, might never have hankered after my neighbour's cash —or anything else that was his, might have gone to church twice every Sunday, and bequeathed a dozen

brats to the nation. Then I should not have been the useful dummy I am. Don't mistake me; I am not scoffing at the virtues. No man serves his country so well as he who leaves it worthy children. I am merely estimating the use of the useless—the tares in the great wheatfield—the 'pitiful rascals' who, as Falstaff points out, are, at any rate, food for powder. That is it. I am a pitiful rascal, Fleming, and therefore a fitter target than you."

Ulyett stopped, laughed, and resumed:

"It is you straightforward fellows who get into the tightest places. The devil owes you a grudge for not bowing down in the House of Rimmon. And that reminds me—is there an old-fashioned parson anywhere about here? If there is, I don't know that I would not make his life happy by letting him bully me a little. They love a repentant sinner. But he must be old-fashioned. I cannot stand either the newfangled High Priest in petticoats and biretta, or the bumptious Evangelical who has little Latin and less Greek, and paints the future in the guise of a Woffendale furnace. And as for the Broad Churchman—well, we all know whither the broad way leads. Time was when parsons were content to be gentlemen first and priests afterwards. Is there one of that sort hanging about anywhere?"

"I think Paton is a thoroughly good fellow," said Quentin.

"I am sure Mrs. Paton is a thoroughly good fellow," said Ulyett. "I suppose it would not do to send for her as the Vicar's deputy, would it? Yet Kinglake maintained that every man ought to be allowed his Egeria."

"My dear fellow, I will send for anybody and anything you please."

Fleming's voice was not so steady as usual. The circumstances were not calculated to steady a man's voice. This was such an entirely new Ulyett.

"No, it isn't a new Ulyett," said the other, reading Quentin's thought, "it is only the bottom of me coming up. When a man is dying the effect is that of deep-sea dredging—it brings up all sorts of unexpected things. I begin to feel important too. Do you know, Fleming, I am thoroughly enjoying all this."

"More than I am."

"I know, and am sorry. To you it seems humiliating to owe anything to anybody. You have always had life under your feet, as it were. But when a fellow has been kicked from pillar to post—and perfectly aware he deserved it—it's a new and exhilarating sensation to find himself boss of the show. Therefore I am enjoying myself amazingly. Don't spoil my enjoyment by feeling things too much, old fellow."

"Anything you wish, Jack."

Ulyett laughed again.

"Thank you. How surprising that sounds! But you were always ready to stretch a helping hand. Now tell me about Aveland's death. Was it sudden?"

"At the last—yes. But he had been failing rapidly for some time."

"I wish that I could have seen him again. I respected him very deeply. He had great patience, and I am afraid he had suffered much—not from illness, but from life, from poverty."

Fleming felt the words smite him with the old pain

of that last evening at Sandhayes; for till Aveland had spoken he had never thought his father's friend had suffered privation.

"You would not be likely to notice that, old fellow," Jack continued, discovering Quentin's regret with that odd insight of his; "you have always been out of all that, lucky for you! It is fellows like me, who have been put to hard shifts themselves, who read the meaning of the lines in a man's face. Once I picked up a penny in the road, and was thankful for it; and once" —here he laughed a little—"a doctor—clever man he was too—recommended a light diet to me when my diet for some time had been so remarkably light that I was considerably puzzled how to exist at all! I remember thinking what a tremendous joke it was, and how taken aback he would be if I told him how unnecessary was his admonition on that score. I daresay it would have worried him, for he was a good fellow; so it was just as well he didn't know. There are no fallals about poverty. No rose-covered cottage with snowy tablecloth, and new-laid eggs, and high-minded sentiment—Lazarus in Abraham's bosom, snug and comfortable. Oh no, modern poverty is the living Lazarus with all his sores well exposed and the flies getting on them; Lazarus in rags—Lazarus in dirt—Lazarus with no friends but the dogs—Lazarus altogether beastly! That is the real thing, Fleming. It did not matter so much to me. I had no one belonging to me, and could generally turn to and swindle somebody out of a few pounds—or borrow them from you, old fellow. But it must have been awful for a man like Aveland, who could not stoop to things of that sort. This world is no place for an honourable

man; the parsons are right. You'll not forget to let Paton know there is some one here in need of the Commination Service?"

"I will fetch him at any time you wish."

"Well, say this afternoon or evening. Whichever suits him."

"I'll drive over and bring him back. My wife would like to see you. We will come this evening if we shall not disturb you."

"Is it likely either of you would disturb me?" asked Jack, his eyes brightening.

"Then Paton will be here this afternoon, and we will appear some time after he has gone—is that right?"

"Quite right, and thanks."

"Don't say that—don't thank me, I mean. What can I say to show what I feel I owe to you?"

"Say nothing"—a laugh sparkled in Ulyett's eyes, "I tell you, I am enjoying it all."

The two men clasped hands. Perhaps in that grasp there was as much expressed as though both had talked for a week. Human speech is very poor save in swearing, then it becomes vigorous and picturesque—a proof of the savagery of the race; for had the gentler emotions been better cultivated, language would have been better adapted to express them.

Quentin went down the narrow staircase, feeling like Sindbad when he got rid of the Old Man of the Sea. He was free!—free! Then he called himself names for being so exhilarated, when he was only saved by an innocent man taking the burden. Nevertheless, he *was* exhilarated. He walked home quickly, lighthearted as a boy, thinking of what his wife would say —of the sudden smoothing of their lives after the

sudden storm. Nothing more to be feared! And this security, this happiness, was owing to Jack Ulyett. Fleming turned and glanced back at the old inn standing in the sunshine. It was a curious thought that the Grey Wolf and Jack Ulyett were for ever to be such landmarks in life to Quentin. Great is the power of small things. Great also the power of worthless things, whether for good or for evil.

CHAPTER XXXIX

AN hour after Quentin had left him Ulyett had another visitor, his cousin Esmé Rusholme. She came in with the subdued, yet cheerful air proper to a sick room, and sank into a chair by the bedside with a prim noiselessness and look of solicitude that did her great credit.

"I am so surprised, Jack, by your return."

"So am I, Esmé. I find it difficult to express my astonishment all round."

There was a brief pause. Esmé was not fluent of speech, particularly with her cousin Jack; for the reason that he was—in the matter of tongue—considerably more than her match, and being a relative, was apt to put things with a cousinly frankness that was not agreeable. Instinctively she felt her outer robe of prim piety was her best defence here.

"I am glad at least," she said, "that my letter enabled you to perceive your duty."

"What is my duty?" Ulyett carelessly inquired. "I have observed that the word duty is much used by unpleasant people when they are in a bad temper and wish to worry somebody. What is disturbing you just now, Esmé? You ought to be in the sweetest and happiest of moods. By the way, I have not congratulated you yet. I do though—and all your friends also."

The last few words sounded ambiguous, but his

listener evidently understood their meaning, for the cold eyes had an angry gleam in them as she replied with emphasis:

"Certainly, I am to be congratulated. And I beg you to remember, Jack, that good people do not scoff at the word 'duty.'"

"Did I ever make any pretensions to the adjective? I think not. You and I and Ralph were all pretty well tarred with the same brush, were we not?"

"I do not understand you, Jack. Perhaps your broken leg has caused a little fever? You seem slightly delirious."

Her cousin laughed.

"Truth does sound like delirium, does it not? People hear it so seldom. What I wanted explained was my supposed duty."

"To bring poor Ralph's murderer to justice."

Ulyett gazed at her reflectively. She looked at him with her characteristic sidelong glance, and recognized in his eyes the gleam of contemptuous amusement that had so often aroused her anger. Jack perceived too much. That had always been the reason of her dislike to him. Men of Ulyett's stamp are often excellent judges of character.

"Well, really," he said, "the first brother seems to have bequeathed his own character to all succeeding relations. Why should you so desire me to end this present life with a rope round my neck?"

For once Esmé looked surprised. Usually her face was as primly expressionless as a doll's, but just now she was for a moment surprised.

"Do not be silly, Jack. You know who murdered my poor Ralph."

"Good!" murmured Ulyett, "'my poor Ralph' is good! Very good. Go on."

Esmé shot a venomous glance at him and went on, not noticing the interruption.

"You know all about it. You saw Quentin Fleming strike him down, and you took a bribe of a thousand pounds to keep silence. Justice has been delayed by your concealment"—Esmé was rather fond of copy-book phrases, she thought they sounded well—"it is your clear duty to make amends by revealing the truth."

"Oh, my soul! What a tale! Now if you had got it up on my behalf, Esmé, I might have admired it. As things are, I wish your inventive powers had been exercised in another direction. That letter of yours hurried me home. But for it I should have gone out quietly over there and been dropped into a hole in the sand, comfortably forgotten. You compel me to retire from this too respectable sphere labelled murderer in addition to my other titles of honour. When you more than hinted of suspicion falling upon Fleming, there was no other course open to me but to come back and own up. I am the man, Esmé. Blind John's companion and all the rest of it. I have written a confession in case I depart this life before judge and jury can decide my fate. So there it is, Esmé."

"It is a plot!" she exclaimed furiously, her grey eyes narrowing like a snake's, as they always did when she was enraged. "I know better. Quentin has bribed you to say this. I will go to the police myself and expose him."

"I would not, if I were you," responded her cousin, calmly. "As I have already been identified by two

people, and have, moreover, made my dying speech and confession, it is hardly probable that much notice would be taken of your fancies. Also, as you have caught a parson, and presumably intend to lead an exemplary life in future, it would not be wise of you, Esmé, to draw attention to Ralph and yourself. For instance, you might find it awkward to explain that week last summer at Ralph's little shooting-box on the moors."

Esmé's face immediately resumed its prim doll aspect, with an underlying suggestion of stubbornness.

"I do not know what you mean. I was never at any shooting-box on the moors."

"Quite right," said Ulyett, approvingly. "Always deny a thing flatly. It is the best policy. Even if your statement is proved a lie, still keep on lying. Many people will believe you. Indeed, such is the vitality of a proved lie that it frequently succeeds in being accepted as truth, even by those who know it to be false. Human nature gravitates naturally towards a lie and pats the liar. When a man or woman speaks the truth we throw stones at them. You will never have stones thrown at you, Esmé."

"I do not know what you mean," she repeated, with the unruffled self-possession of such as she.

Ulyett threw himself back on his pillows and laughed.

"We had a pretty lively week at that little place of Ralph's, had we not? you and Ralph and I. There wasn't much to choose between us, take it all round. Then there was that girl Rossela, who waited on you. I am convinced Ralph had beaten her into civility before our arrival."

"She has sailed for America," said Esmé, incautiously.

"Has she? Ah, with the cash gained by betraying me to old Elkanah. Well, she might come back, or the keepers might turn up and identify you, or the fellow who drove us. Also, you would have to reconcile the discrepancy between your leaving Woffendale and your arrival at your Driffield friend's house."

"If I did go anywhere—which I did not—I went with a relation, yourself."

"I am afraid that excuse would be too thin for the world in general, Esmé; especially considering Ralph's reputation—not to mention that your humble relative was never regarded as a reliable guide for youth. No, Esmé, I fear that really would not do. Even Crosier would hardly swallow it."

"I was never there—never out of Driffield during my stay."

Ulyett nodded.

"Stick to that; it is the safest thing to say. And marry Crosier; it is the safest thing to do. You will make him an excellent wife, and keep him from boring a better woman to death. Women of your type always become pious and domestic in middle age; it is their peculiar hall-mark."

"I suppose all this means that you intend to say something to Mr. Crosier—to stop my marriage, if possible."

"Not at all, my dear Esmé. You entirely mistake me. I would even hasten your wedding if possible, and would give you the best of characters to Crosier if he asked me. Once married to him, you will be well out of the way, and just now that seems to me a

desirable thing. You will be far too busy playing the holy domestic part in Sweet Auburn to find time for worrying your betters—meaning the Flemings. It was really absurd of you to try to marry Quentin. I should have felt obliged to tell him of our cheerful little visit to the moors, and of various other trifles. So you see, Esmé, you never had a chance of him. Let that console you, and reconcile you to the worthy parson and the quiet village to which he is so kindly taking you."

"Mr. Crosier is quite as good a man as Quentin Fleming, and better; so if you object to my marrying the one you ought also to object to my marrying the other."

"Oh no; Crosier has chosen you of his own free will. Also, as I have said, you will make him an excellent wife. Neither of these reasons applies to Fleming—see?"

Esmé did see. She perceived her own defeat. Well, she had lost her revenge, but all was not gone. There remained Crosier. Ulyett evidently had no intention of disturbing the happy arrangement existing. Much consolation was to be found in a comfortable marriage and the prospect of being chief ruler in schools and school-feasts, parish meetings, missionary lectures, and perhaps—glory of glories—entertaining a bishop. All these visions were so soothing that Esmé, relieved of her fears respecting her engagement, rose briskly, remarking, "I think, Jack, you are the most utterly worthless man I ever met."

"That is the general opinion, I believe," he replied, cheerfully; "but I think my two partners—you and Ralph—ran me pretty close. There was ingenuity too

about your proceedings, Esmé. You played a clever game, and I believe you had a chance of winning if fate had not sent that unlucky day. You meant to marry Ralph, and, considering what he was, you went the right way to work. A solid entanglement will sometimes drag a man like that before the parson when nothing else will. And as a last resource, you could have appealed to old Elkanah, who is a queer moral old boy, and would undoubtedly have taken your part. Yes, Esmé, I saw your game from the first, and admired the cleverness of it. You know I never interfered with it."

"I suppose you did not interfere when you committed murder?"

There was a cold glitter in Esme's eyes when she said this. Assuredly her dislike of her cousin was not lessening.

He looked oddly at her.

"That was pure accident. Fate interfered, not I."

"Good-bye, Jack! I forgive you."

"Thanks. People usually say that when they mean to be extra nasty. Why don't you put the gilded top on it by telling me you will pray for me?"

"Certainly I will. I always do—for everybody."

Ulyett fell back again on his pillows, and laughed long and loudly, as loudly as his strength permitted.

Esmé smiled pityingly, murmured a gentle "Good-bye," and rustled softly away.

Here let it be said that Esmé's life was throughout smooth and happy. Having duly appeared before Woffendale eyes in white silk and orange-blossom, Mrs. Crosier now fulfils every duty of a Vicar's wife, and is regarded—by the men—as a pattern to all

women of the neighbourhood. And, indeed, women of Esmé's type do undoubtedly make good wives—not good mothers, but certainly good wives. When their first youth is passed they are old in thought and feeling, and easily settle down to a routine of new clothes, domestic trivialities, and small duties, for which they get much praise; as the stagnant pool, though filthy, is quiet, and by-and-by covers itself with soft green blossoming weed. Whereas genius, whether in man or woman, is as the sea, drawn hither and thither by the stars; eternally young, eternally restless with the unrest of strong vitality and quick responsiveness to the attracting stars. This, doubtless, being the reason why rarely-gifted men and women are seldom happy in their marriages. Not many love the sea, its storm and shine, its wrecks, its sunlit glancing opal, all its beauty and mystery. Better walk by the slimy pool and admire the blossoming weed: it is pretty and useful; the tadpoles are content beneath its shadow; the bitter salt of the sea would not suit them. There is a use for everything in this world. Even the Helots served as warnings.

CHAPTER XL

THE length of a day is not to be measured by the shadow on the dial. Long after—years after, this September day seemed to several people the longest of their lives. Nay, it was not a day; it was a lifetime. For what is a lifetime? Is it the changes of the sun and moon; the passing of the seasons; the things which are seen? Or is it the changes of thought and crystallization of mood; the ebb and flow of feeling; the things which are unseen? These invisible things then made this one day as many years to those whose lives met in a tangle at the Grey Wolf for a few brief hours. So much happened; much revulsion of feeling, much turmoil of human spirit in the quiet little inn.

The shadows were lengthening now; shadows of fern and willow, of beech and pine. The yellow sunshine had deepened to marigold; the rooks cawed sleepily round the old Hall. Paton had come and gone. Quentin had returned from Woffendale, where he had been since the morning; and McKie had come with him. Elkanah Fleming remained unconscious, neither better nor worse; perhaps rather worse in that he was not better.

"He is not likely to get over that fit," said McKie, sitting with Quentin in the Hall dining-room, "an auld man canna stand sic upsetting of his hearthstane. Weel, weel, we maun all gang someday. Yon laddie"

—with a wag of his head in direction of the Wolf—"is going fast. He's worse to-day, though he nae thinks it. He has just held on to the last, keeping the life in him till he got home. He'll go like the flame of a candle when ye blow it out. Ay, it's a pity!" here McKie blew a sigh like the starting puff of a locomotive. "Quentin, I'm thinking yon laddie is no what I thought him. There's a glint in his een when he looks at me. He thinks me an auld fool, and he's no far wrong. But I'm beginning to see mair than I did. I think better of him. He never touched Ralph, but he knows all about it. The look in his ee tells me that. He is screening somebody, that's what he is doing;" McKie laid a hand impressively on Quentin's knee, "he is screening somebody."

"Me," said Quentin.

"Ye!—are ye daft?"

Yet even as he spoke he saw that it might be true.

"It was accidental of course. The blow was intentional, but I never supposed it would kill Ralph. I was prepared to own to it if Blind John recognized Ulyett and he was accused. Now, however, he has taken steps to prevent my doing so. I——"

But by this time McKie had recovered himself and reviewed the situation. He was unable to discover Ulyett's motive, but that mattered nothing. The advantage thus gained was the main point.

"Quentin, lad," he interrupted solemnly, "ye must let a dying man have his way. Ulyett's right. He'll no live a week, and there's none to suffer by the suspicion. Now don't ye say a word mair. I'm ready to testify to the haill o' creation that yon laddie is in

his right mind and of pairfect understanding. He's a clever laddie! I didn't think he had it in him."

"I did not think I had it in me to do an act so unspeakably contemptible as to save myself at another's expense."

"Weel," said McKie, philosophically, "nae doubt there's the making of a grand criminal in maist of us. I would not trouble o'er that, lad. It's none of your doing. How came Ulyett to know? Did he see ye?"

While Fleming explained and the old Scotchman listened with the deepest attention, Frances was sitting in Ulyett's room at the Grey Wolf, trying to put her gratitude into speech that would convey one half of what she felt and thought of the matter.

"It is not right," she said. "We are deeply, unutterably grateful to you, but nothing can make it right."

"The world is full of wrongs, Mrs. Fleming; here is a wrong that does nobody any harm, and is the only good thing I have ever done. Do not deprive me of that satisfaction."

She smiled slightly as she replied:

"You have put it out of my power to do that."

Ulyett was looking his best just now. The man was really happy. "Nothing in his life became him like the leaving it." To begin with, he had the recklessness and insouciance of the born gambler, to whom death is but an adverse throw of the dice. Ulyett was one of those men who properly belong to an earlier age. As a soldier of fortune, alternately plundering and fighting, careless of the morrow, snatching gold with one hand and flinging it to a beggar with the other, Jack Ulyett would have been in his element.

There is no room nowadays for such men. They will not learn the modern ways of plundering, and they get into trouble. But Ulyett's good angel was evidently a capable fellow, and had pulled his man within reach of a splendid chance at the last. Jack had only to stretch out his hand and take it. And he did. As he said to Quentin, he was feeling himself boss of the show. He was able to do a signal service to the woman he admired and reverenced; and at the same time to repay, in better coin than gold, the debt he owed Quentin Fleming. Also, in the background, there were his respect for Aveland, his satisfaction in circumventing his cousin Esmé, and his gambler's pleasure in holding a winning hand. All these motives —mingling with a certain lazy kindliness, a dramatic appreciation of the situation, and a vague hope that at the Day of Reckoning this one grain of corn among the husks might be counted to him for righteousness —all these interwoven thoughts and feelings had exhilarated him. The red rings of his hair curled tightly, his blue eyes sparkled, his whole being radiated a sort of amused content that sent a glow to the deathly pallor of his face, as a light behind porcelain. It was a kindly arrangement, either of his guardian angel or of fate, that permitted Ulyett to be last remembered as he looked then: a long-limbed slender man, with strong delicate hands that showed his breeding—for he came of better blood than his cousins the Rusholmes —hands that would have grasped a sword-hilt well; with ruddy locks like David the king; and bright eyes, a little hard perhaps, and puckered at the corners; the whole face too, a little hard and lined—scorched, it may be, by too near approach to hell—yet kindly and

a trifle pathetic. This was Ulyett at the Grey Wolf; Ulyett just before he died.

Seeing him now, and regarding him with a more observant glance than she had hitherto bestowed on him, Frances felt a return of the wave of remorse which had swept over her on the moor that morning. She had then wished for Ulyett's death, and had repented of the wish almost before it had taken definite shape in her mind. Now that she knew the generosity of this man, knew what he was doing for her and hers, her repentance of that transient thought became tenfold stronger—the stronger, perhaps, because the wish would be fulfilled. Ulyett would undoubtedly die. A sense of guilt oppressed her and she could not speak of it. Some confessions only give useless pain. When that is so, the confession is best not made. Her repentant sorrow went up from her heart into her eyes and stayed there, since it might not pass her lips. Ulyett saw the shadow and spoke:

"Do not be sorry for me, Mrs. Fleming. Indeed, I am a very lucky fellow. I have never before been of the slightest use to anybody. If you knew what pleasure it gives me to put things a little straight for your husband. You have no idea how much he did for me."

Here Ulyett devoutly hoped she would never know the story of the stolen money, and how he had been saved from a prison cell by Quentin's generosity. Few people desire omniscience in their friends.

"Whatever Quentin may have done for you must be trifling indeed to what you are doing for us," she said, remorsefully. "I am very glad—I cannot help being glad, yet I know you ought not to do it and we

ought not to accept it. I reproach myself for my gladness."

"Why should you? Let us look at the beginning of it all. The initial fault was Ralph's, who made himself so intolerable that no self-respecting man could help hitting him. The result was just accident—ill-luck—the natural tendency of things to go crooked for people who are not so. Had I hit Ralph, nothing would have happened. As you see, those same crooked things have turned out well for me, giving me a pleasure of which I am wholly unworthy. Your gladness, Mrs. Fleming, cannot equal mine."

She shook her head. There seemed nothing for her to say. She could not urge his removal to the Hall in the face of the fact that he was less safe there than at the Grey Wolf. She could not express a wish to nurse him back to health when she knew that, humanly speaking, his recovery was well-nigh impossible; and that if he did recover, it would be to stand his trial for a blow he had never struck. Convenient, conventional, pretty lies, did not come naturally to Frances. She could but wish, with all her heart, that this miserable coil had never been twisted. And of what use was that? The terrible clear-sightedness that had led her on Wildersmoor to perceive the one way to smooth all, compelled her even now to see it. Ulyett's death was the only way out of the tangle. She had told him his generous self-sacrifice had made her glad. So it had, in the sense of relief. She need no longer fear the future for Quentin. Yet as all things bring their shadows with them, this relief brought its abiding shadow, the perpetual acquiescence in a lie; a position wellnigh intolerable to Aveland's daughter. All her

life she must hear the lie and agree to it, concealing the truth. It was better—anything was better than that her husband should be consigned to a convict's cell, to inevitably emerge from it a changed man, and possibly changed for the worse. Oh, yes, to hear and to agree to Ulyett's generous lie was infinitely better. Yet it involved the branding of an innocent man for her own good and for the good of the one nearest to her. Of course, Ulyett's voluntary acceptance of the brand made it his own act; not hers or another's. Still, the shadow remained, would always remain. It was the loss of freedom of spirit that she felt and resented. Her feet were netted in the tangles of others' lives and must walk warily, losing the old free careless stride. Compared with the shackles worn by many men and women, these tangles were slight indeed; yet they were not slight to Frances. As her father had never sunk into the slovenly apathy of poverty, but chafed and raged against it, thereby saving himself from its degradation; stepping on the surface of the bog he was compelled to traverse, instead of sinking therein—so Frances would never contentedly acquiesce in the lie that assured peace to her and her husband. Always she would fret in spirit against the necessity for seeming agreement; and by that very chafing would be preserved from that fatuous habit of mind common to most people as life runs on; the habit of believing that all things, even right and wrong, should bow to their convenience; that even a lie is not a lie if it serves any good purpose to them.

Yet, as Frances was most unlikely to adopt the average manner of thinking, the curb was not needed. And the pity of it! The unnecessary fatigue of life in-

volved; and through no fault of hers, as Aveland's poverty had been no fault of his.

She rose with a sudden swift movement, and stood looking down upon Ulyett. It was characteristic of her that having so risen she stood absolutely still. There was a most restful absence of restlessness about Frances.

One can do a deal of thinking in a minute. There he lay, the man whose death was so much desired, would be so useful—the man in the way, as she had said to herself upon the moor. Presently he would die, and not all her sense of obligation would check her feeling of relief; and ever after she would lie about him, by implication if not in actual words; a hateful necessity that was visibly here and yet seemed no one's fault in particular. That swift rising of hers had been the expression of a sudden desire to flee away—to another planet if need be—away from this necessity. There was one comforting thought: Quentin would not chafe over the matter as she did. Frances knew intuitively that he would accept his friend's generosity as frankly as it was given, would affectionately respect his memory, and enjoy his own rescued life; all of which would be much wiser than her own more serious view. All this, so long to write, passed through her mind in one quick flash as she stood there. And Ulyett, understanding perfectly, said:

"You take it all too seriously, Mrs. Fleming. Indeed you do. The whole thing resolves itself into—firstly, an accident; secondly, a happy chance for me. That is all. Try to forget me—to forget everything. I am sorry you ever knew. I told your husband so. Had he seen me before telling you, the whole affair

would have passed over without your being troubled by the knowledge of it."

"I think it is only fair that I should share Quentin's troubles as well as his happiness."

"Yes, if you do not share his troubles and leave him his happiness," returned Ulyett, smiling. "I mean that Quentin will bear his troubles lightly. By-and-by, when all this is over, he will be as happy as ever; and that is as it should be. I am sure you will agree with me in this. Well, if you permit his bygone troubles to sadden you, are you not refusing to share his happiness? But here am I presuming to offer you advice. I ought to be ashamed of myself."

"Not at all. You are quite right. Yet I cannot help regretting the injustice to you."

"Oh, as to that, I much prefer it to having justice done me. The due reward of my deeds would by no means conduce to my comfort. Leave me the injustice, Mrs. Fleming. It is really no injustice at all, but the simple payment of a debt I owe your husband. And indeed, I am deeply in debt all round, for the happiest days of my life were spent at Sandhayes."

"Were they? I am glad." Frances spoke with surprise and self-reproach, remembering how quietly this man used to follow Quentin into the old house, saying little, never obtruding himself, content to sit back and look on, perhaps throwing in a word now and then. She remembered too, how her father had seemed to like him; talking to him a good deal, noticing him more than most people did, for Ulyett was in the position of a black sheep without any wool to sell. He had been a very meek black sheep at Sandhayes: silent, courteous, soft-voiced, observant of others' wishes,

drifting in with Quentin, and out again when he left, rarely coming alone, and then only with a deprecatory air that might not have become many men, but which sat well on Ulyett with his sinewy grace, subdued swagger, and hawk-like look—a somewhat battered, thoroughly-tame-for-the-time Free Companion.

In those days Frances had regarded him chiefly as a piece of furniture which Quentin was in the habit of carrying about with him, and which was therefore to be treated kindly for Quentin's sake. So far as she had been conscious of any particular feeling towards him, it was one of vague dislike simply because he was intimate with Ralph Fleming, whom she detested. Therefore it had so happened that the man himself—Jack Ulyett—she had not noticed much. Also he had been overshadowed by his friend Quentin. Beside Fleming's height and breadth and debonair good looks, Jack's lean and battered picturesqueness seemed somehow to fade into the background. Here, however, alone in this poor room, he could be seen as he really was: worn, battered, yet undeniably picturesque, with that indefinable stamp of breeding from head to heel, and that rarest of charms, a very beautiful speaking voice. Numberless men and women can sing divinely, but how many can speak divinely? On Ulyett this gift had been bestowed in its fulness; no sweeter, more persuasive tones were possible.

"I was always very happy at Sandhayes," he repeated.

And Frances, remembering him at her old home felt constrained to say:

"I have never done you justice in any way. I am sorry."

Which fell exquisitely on Jack's ears. But he answered with his customary light soft gaiety:

"Did I not say I should be scared if I heard that I should meet with justice? Believe me, I am nothing, Mrs. Fleming, nothing worth your attention for one moment. You and your father made me very happy, wholly undeserved happiness. And I am happy now. Undeservedly so again."

"You will try to get well?" she said, almost imploringly, completely forgetting for the moment what awaited them all if he did get well.

"I doubt whether I should succeed! Better not. I shall never have another such chance of departing this life in peace. My star is just now in the ascendant. Best not wait for its inevitable declination."

Modern women do not weep. The facile tearfulness of old has vanished before freedom. But it was with a distinct effort that Frances spoke again:

"We will not lose you if anything can save. Quentin is coming to sit with you to-night. He thinks Granny Darlow is too old. So he and Vose will take turns."

"Fleming is very good. I can assure him, though, that Granny is capable as though she was twenty—more so, in fact. I must not be a burden to you."

"No burden, as you know. I must go now. I will come again to-morrow, and try to thank you."

"I am more than thanked by your coming to-day."

Frances shook her head and smiled, held out her hand to him and looked round the room to see what more she could send for his comfort, begging him to say what he would like. Whereupon he protested there was nothing he needed; he had all he wished.

Left alone, Ulyett turned to the window, whence he could see the road to the Hall. He watched Frances walking home in the gold of the evening sunshine, saw Quentin meet her at the gates, then the curve of the drive hid them both from Jack's sight.

CHAPTER XLI

WHEN Vose came in a little later to know his guest's pleasure concerning dinner, he was struck by an indefinable change in Ulyett. He seemed to have suddenly become more transparent, more pinched about the features.

"Are you not feeling so well, sir?" Vose inquired. "Because theer's William to go up to th' Hall any minute fur Dr. McKie. He's dining theer to-night."

"Oh, I'm all right thank you. Much the same as usual. Where is Granny Darlow?"

"Hoo's nigh if so be as you want her, sir. But Mr. Quentin said he'd coom hissen an' sit with you to-night. He didna seem to think much o' Granny fur sitting up. Not but what hoo's wick enow," added Vose. He always stood up for Granny.

"I should like to see the old woman for a few minutes."

"I'll send her up, sir."

The landlord was edging out of the narrow door when Ulyett stopped him by suddenly asking, "Vose, where shall I be buried?"

The unexpected question was not startling to Vose. As a true northern man, he held a certain solicitude about the place of one's burial to be decent and fitting. He stroked his chin meditatively.

"Well, sir, I reckon that's as you please."

"I should like to be buried at North Rode."

"Very good, sir. I'll tell Mr. Quentin if so be——"

Vose's delicacy left the sentence unfinished. He gently closed the door, and went downstairs into the big sanded bar-room, which at the Wolf ought perhaps to be more correctly called by its old name of the "house-place." Here before a noble fire—the fire that burnt on the hearth of the Wolf winter and summer, regardless of season—William was assiduously basting a fowl intended for Ulyett's dinner, and conversing with a customer seated in the chimney-corner, the poacher who had volunteered to assist in concealing Ulyett from the police if need be.

"He thinks he's going to dee," said Vose, in tones of concern, jerking his thumb upwards, to signify the individual meant.

"Do he?" exclaimed the poacher.

William paused in his basting, holding the big iron spoon aloft.

"Owd McKie didna seem to think so," pursued Vose, vexedly, "an' I dunnot want to think so either. It's a pity!"

"I dunno," said William, reflectively.

"Happen th' gentleman knows best hissen," said the poacher, "but I'll own to being a bit disappointed. I wur reckoning o' helping him dodge them police, and wur thinking how lucky it wur that I wur out o' gaol. It seemed providential-loike."

"Ay, it did," assented Vose. "William, go an' fetch Granny Darlow. He wants to see th' owd lass. I'll baste th' bird while thou'rt gone."

"Nay—nay," the poacher interposed, politely, "I'll look to th' cooking. I'm a rare good cook, as my

missis could tell thee. Th' bird 'll wait till I've filled my pipe."

He rammed the tobacco down with his finger, lit it with a live coal in the tongs, pulled his chair in front of the fire, turned up his sleeves, and proceeded to baste the fowl with a dexterity that threw William's skill into the shade.

Granny had gone cockle-gathering, but might be home any minute; so William heard from a neighbour.

"That's as well," said Vose, "fur if theer's any more talking to be done it's time Mr. Ulyett had summat to eat first. He's getten a look as worrits me."

"Happen this 'll fettle him a bit," observed the poacher, referring to the sizzling bird.

He turned his head as he spoke to look at a stranger who was entering, a smooth-shaven, rather heavy-looking man; who ordered ale, and then inquired whether he could lodge there for a day or two. At this, Poaching Jim half-turned in his chair, caught Vose's eye, made a rapid circle round his own wrists behind the new-comer's back, and resumed his care of the fowl. William pensively seated himself on the bottom step of the narrow staircase that rose straight out of the living-room.

"I've got noan room fur lodgers," Vose answered, a trifle surlily. "I dunnot care about 'em."

"There's a saying about Woffendale that you've got one anyways, an invalid gentleman that Blind John knows. Of course, it's the duty of the police to find Mr. Ralph Fleming's murderer, so I thought I'd come here and keep an eye on him without inconveniencing you, Mr. Vose."

"I conna say what Blind John may ha' said or not

ha' said," replied Vose, slowly, "but this I know, that I'm dom'd if I'll ha' th' owd Wolf turned into th' Woffendale lockups! If thee wants to keep an eye on th' place, thee con put a sentry-box outside an' stay theer. But what tha thinks to gain by it beats me. Owd Elkanah 'ud believe owt, as is only natural; an' he's like to dee, so he'll noan ha' a chance of thanking thee. An' young Fleming—Mr. Quentin, an' th' invalid gentleman is great friends. A noice doment Mr. Quentin 'ud make if his friend couldna dee in peace."

The stranger seemed rather puzzled.

"Then the family do not believe Blind John's statement? I am a detective, and it is a good case to work up. If I brought a warrant with me, Mr. Vose, you would be compelled to recognize the majesty of the law."

"Dom the majesty of the law!" said Vose.

"And it is not to be denied that you have suspicious characters here. I'll swear I've seen that man in Woffendale gaol," turning suddenly to the poacher.

"Why o' course tha has," responded the culprit, unabashed, "an' it's more than loikely tha 'll see me theer again, if tha lives long enow. But tha needna glower at me. I've done my toime an' it's my close season now!" with a grin.

There was an audible chuckle from William on guard on the stairs. But Vose was too angry to be amused by anything.

"Hast thou said thy say?" he inquired of the stranger, with ominous calm, "because theer's th' door. Tha'll ha' to coom wi' a warrant afore thou crosses th' threshold again."

"All right," said the man, finishing his ale, "most like I'll be here to-morrow." He sauntered out of the Wolf, looked round hesitatingly, then set off towards the station.

"He'll just catch the Woffendale train," said the poacher. "I'll go an' ask th' porter if he went by it."

"Who's the chap? Police?" inquired Vose.

"Nay, he just touts for 'em. Ferrets about an' brings 'em news. Saves them trouble an' gets summat fur his. He's keen on rewards. I reckon he's mad at losing owd Elkanah's. Happen he thought th' owd chap would give him something if he helped to nab th' gentleman."

"I wish I'd helped him out with my foot!" said Vose, regretfully. "Why didn't thee think on 't, William?"

"I did," replied William, "but I wur feart o' leaving th' stair."

"Ne'er mind," said the poacher, "I'll wring's neck one o' these days. I'm pretty sure it wur him that set keepers on to me last toime. What art tha going to do about th' gentleman? Theer's th' hut on th' moor. We might put him theer till we see whether th' chap brings th' police here or no in th' morning."

"Th' sea is like a pond this weather, an a boat would take him to Man safe enow," replied Vose. "I'll up to the Hall an' see Mr. Quentin about it."

But when Vose got there he was met by the news that Fleming and McKie had gone to Woffendale in the train that had just left the station with the self-constituted detective in it.

"I wanted to see Mr. Fleming," said Vose.

He would be back by ten, the servant said. He had

gone because a telegram had come to say the old gentleman was dead.

"What!—owd Elkanah!" exclaimed Vose. This was wholly unexpected. He pondered a moment, then said, "You needna tell Mrs. Fleming I came. Theer's no call to disturb her. I'll see Mr. Fleming later. Tell him I've been here."

And Vose returned to the Grey Wolf with the news.

"That'll settle th' detective chap most like," said the poacher.

"I dunno," said William. "He conna get owt from Elkanah now, but he might get summat from police. Me an' Jim's been thinking," he continued, addressing Vose, "that if so be as th' police coom, we might carry Mr. Ulyett out at th' back to Granny Darlow's till we could get him off i' th' neet."

"Ay, that's a good thought. We'll do it. Has Granny come?"

She had arrived a minute ago and was upstairs, sitting motionless by Ulyett's bedside. He had asked for his purse, and was looking into it with an expression of careless dismay. The last few hours had changed him greatly. The glow had faded out of his face, leaving it pinched and waxen; his voice, too, was weaker.

"Upon my soul," he said, with his old vivacity, "there's not enough cash to bury me decently! Well, I've been dipping into other people's pockets all my life, and it is evident I shall keep it up to the end. Granny, there's a pound or two for you, with thanks for your care of me, and yet more thanks for not administering that little dose you thought of. You see there is no need of it."

"Thou art a good pluck'd un! I shouldna ha'

thought it of thee," said Granny, with reluctant admiration. "Ay, I meant to kill thee if thou didna dee natural like."

"I shall die natural like," he said, with a faint laugh.

"Thou are safe enow fro' me," Granny went on, "I didna know what soart tha was. How could I? If thou hast done nowt good but this i' a' thy life, thou hast done well. Thou art safe enow fro' me, I tell thee. An' I willna take th' brass."

"Why not? You deserve it for sitting up with me last night."

"That wur nowt. I wur glad to be by to see how things wur going on. I willna take it."

And she did not.

"Well, we will argue it out by-and-by," said Ulyett. "I'll have a sleep now. I am tired."

He slept on while the west faded from red to orange, then to clear green; and the stars came out overhead in the blue. Vose came softly into the room with a shaded light, and Ulyett stirred and opened his eyes.

"Ah," he said, vaguely, "Vose, is it? Good fellow, Vose. Thank you."

Then falling into sleep again, the gambler, thief, and kindly gentleman passed away so quietly that neither Vose nor Granny, though both were sitting by him, knew when he ceased to breathe. But when Quentin came in at ten o'clock, Ulyett was gone.

CHAPTER XLII

HE was buried at North Rode as he wished, near Aveland. Many attended the funeral, for the circumstances of his death and the universal belief that he was Ralph Fleming's murderer, caused all Wildersmoor to feel greatly interested in poor Jack. It was surprising to the moor folk, that Quentin and his wife both followed Ulyett to his last rest.

"They conna believe he did it," was the general comment, "it's queer what fancies gentry has!"

Gradually the crowd dispersed, after seeing the Hall carriage drive off. Nina Paton lingered last by the grave. She was puzzled. She felt certain there was a mystery somewhere, yet what was it? She did not believe in Ulyett's guilt, and said so. But she had met with no encouragement from Frances and her husband. They seemed to listen with a sort of pained silence and a desire to escape from discussing the matter.

"They believe he did it," thought Nina, coming to a precisely opposite conclusion to that of the crowd. "But why not argue it with me? Curious! I cannot make it out. I wish he had lived till the next morning, then I should have seen him again. No, he never did it!"

Here Nina raised her eyes, and there opposite to her, the grave between them, stood Granny Darlow. She too had lingered behind the crowd. Hardly knowing why, Nina uttered the thought in her heart, asked

the question of this strange old woman who had helped to nurse him:

"Did he do it?"

"Ay, I'm sure he did." Granny spoke with the convincing calm of a naturally truthful individual telling a deliberate lie. The habitual liar fails to convince by reason of a certain shiftiness visible in him. His words lack the solid weight of the usually truthful.

"I don't know what to think," said Nina, half to herself.

"I wouldna think owt about it if I wur thee," said Granny. "Th' chap's dead, an' theer it is."

There it is!—the words echoed in Nina's mind, bringing a curious sense of impotence. Granny went away, and the Vicar came out of the church.

"Cyril," said his wife, as they walked home, "I wonder if Jack Ulyett really did kill Ralph Fleming?"

"Of course. There can be no question about it. He was recognized by the blind man John, and died truly penitent."

"Penitent for killing Ralph Fleming! Really, Cyril, I do not think I could feel penitent for killing Ralph Fleming. I should regard myself as a public benefactor. To rid a place of a man like that is much better than giving it free libraries or swimming baths."

"My dear!"

"Did he actually confess it?"

The Vicar paused and considered a moment.

"No," he said, "Mr. Ulyett did not specifically confess the murder, but he acknowledged himself a great sinner and did not deny that he was the missing stranger. I think there can be no doubt. Especially

as the reward was paid by Mr. Fleming senior, proving that he at least, was satisfied respecting the evidence. Probably, had Elkanah Fleming lived, we should have heard more; but as both he and Ulyett are dead, I think Quentin Fleming is right in letting the matter drop as much as possible. It must be very painful for the Rusholmes, and any other relatives Ulyett may have."

"I shall never believe Jack Ulyett did it," said Nina.

"That is nonsense, my dear."

"Who is to decide what is nonsense? You recollect Falstaff? 'Instinct is a great matter. I was a coward upon instinct.' I am a believer upon instinct."

"Only because you happened to like the man."

"Because I liked the man I understand him better. I am not sure that one can ever understand a thing one does not like."

The Vicar mused.

"That may be so. But I rather liked Ulyett myself."

"And yet you believe him guilty?"

"And yet I believe him guilty. He must be, or he would have denied it. He knew he was suspected."

"I am not sure of that. He may have had some reason for silence."

"Mere fancies of yours, Nina. There is no secret whatever now that Ulyett has been recognized as the stranger. That was the only secret in the sad affair."

"My dear Cyril, for thousands of years you men have been trying to keep secrets from us, and we have been trying to find them out. Which process do you think is the more likely to sharpen the perceptions? I tell you a woman can smell a secret as a seaman smells ice, though neither can describe how they do it. There

is a secret in this affair. Of that I am positive. My instinct tells me so. But I cannot imagine what it is."

"Why waste time in wondering about a mere guess?"

"Why does a cat waste time sitting at a mouse-hole? Because she knows the mouse is there, and hopes it will come out presently. Perhaps my mouse will come out some day."

But it never did.

As after a storm the sea settles slowly into calm, so after the stress of those two days life gradually laid aside its tragic mask and resumed its customary Wildersmoor garments of "grey honour and sweet rest." For sweet rest is always there on the moorland; and far away in the dim years to come, grey honour.

One evening a month later a soft drizzling rain was falling over Wildersmoor. The air was warm—autumn is usually warm there—and not the faintest breeze was stirring. Through the fine rain the lights of the Grey Wolf gleamed cheerily; then the dimmer lights in the cottages; and, further on, the lights at the Hall. The night was so still that one could hear the raindrops falling and distinguish on what they fell; whether the road, or the mossy peat, or dripped from the eaves on to the stone steps of the cottages, or splashed into an ever-widening puddle.

Granny Darlow, sitting solitary by her own hearth, rocked herself to and fro in the old rocking-chair, the flickering blaze lighting up her white hair and wrinkled face, and casting her shadow—exaggerated and fantastic—on walls and ceiling as she swung.

Through the soft patter of the rain came the sound of a tapping stick. It paused outside, and with a knock at the door, Blind John stood on the threshold. The old woman turned her head.

"What dost want?" she asked.

"Hast tha heard fro' Rossela sin' hoo went to America?"

"Nay, I hannot."

"Well, that's summat to be thankful fur! I've getten a bit o' news fur thee. Owd Elkanah's brass is a' left to Mrs. Fleming—her that was Miss Aveland—tied on her hard and fast by th' lawyers. Did tha ever!"

"Tha hast no need to chunner. Tha got thy share o' Elkanah's brass," replied Granny.

"Ay, I did," complacently. "That wur a stroke o' luck! I reckon I've getten enow to marry on."

"So tha has. An' theer's plenty o' women fools enow to take thee; but theer's never a woman but what'll be sharp enow to cheat thee when hoo's gotten thee."

John muttered something that sounded like "owd besom!" then said aloud, "Tha mun be thinking o' Rossela. I might ha' thought on her too if hoo hadna been o'er flighty. We might ha' been comfortable wi' a' th' reward between us. Seven hundred pound isna bad fur man an' wife to start housekeepin' wi'. But Rossela's o'er flighty. I'll get a better lass wi' my three hundred an' fifty."

Here Granny stirred impatiently, and John hastily added:

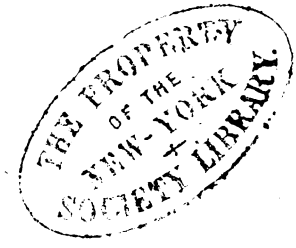
"I'm going on to th' Wolf to tell 'em about owd Elkanah's brass. Good-neet to thee!"

He went away, the tapping of his stick dying in the distance. Granny stretched her withered hands over the fire, and laughed.

"Th' owd fool!" she said.

At last the tapping ceased. John had turned into the Grey Wolf.

THE END.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